A RISING STAR

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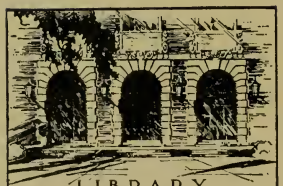

A Rising Star

A NOVEL

BY

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"BOB MARTIN'S LITTLE GIRL," "JOSEPH'S COAT," ETC., ETC.

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A RISING STAR.

CHAPTER XVII.

FOR three weeks the London hoardings flamed with huge posters announcing the approaching production of "The Little Widow". Rows of sandwichmen perambulated the streets bearing portraits of that enticing little person in chrome lithograph. Mark was back in Birmingham, engaged in his customary avocations, working very heartlessly, but producing his daily tale of journalistic bricks with the mechanical facility born of long custom. News reached him from

time to time of the progress of the piece, but he took little interest in its fortunes, and but for Jing's earnest solicitation would not have been present on the first night of its production. Jing was mortal, and a woman, and, therefore, felt a touch of jealousy, and even for a moment of anger, at the news that a mere tyro like Esther should have found so magnificent a chance in London; whilst she, who had taught the girl all she knew, and felt conscious of her own qualities, should still linger in the cold shade of the provinces. How such an extraordinary condition of things should have come about passed her powers of divination. The provincial actress looks to London as the pious Mohammedan looks to Mecca, or beyond Mecca into Paradise; and Jing had fairly palpitated many a time in dreams of success or premonitions of

failure in that exalted region. She even cried a little in the solitude of her own room to think of the injustice of Fate; but she fought herself resolutely out of this envious and despondent mood, and did her best to hope that Esther would come triumphantly through the ordeal which awaited her. This hope at its best was faint and halting, for Jing was not only an artist by instinct, but had been born in her business, and had been familiar with the footlights as long as she could remember, so that she knew the countless difficulties which beset inexperience, and made genius without instruction ineffective.

It goes without saying that Mark had carefully disguised from his old friends the reason for Esther's unlooked-for promotion. That was to his way of thinking altogether too dreadful to be

named, and he buried it in his own bosom, where it made wild work enough.

The night came at last, and Mark wandered aimlessly about the front of the house, barely recognised by anybody. Glynne played the leading part, and Francis was busy behind the curtain. The man in front of the house knew Mark by sight, and conducted him to a box reserved for him. The young author was absurdly early, and as he sat in a dark corner of his box, staring at the green baize which concealed the brand new act drop, he could hear the muffled thunders of the feet that stormed the gallery, and the scarcely more subdued clamour of the pit. The stalls filled slowly, and peeping out now and again he began to fear that the house would be a poor one. Time went on, however, and the stream flowed in

gently and continuously until every seat was occupied. The footlights flared up suddenly, the green baize curtain rose, and a round of applause shook the air as the new act drop was revealed. The money of his grace of Belisle had been expended without stint, and the re-decorated Sheridan Theatre was a model of taste and comfort. The approaches to the better part of the house, what with flowers and greenery, rich and sombre colourings, and with contrasted glitter of mirrors and gilding, looked like the entrance to a fairy palace. The crowded house seemed in excellent temper. Every circumstance but one augured well, and Mark knew already from the provincial acceptance of his piece that it was at least safe from the storm of opprobrium with which a new production in London is so often received. In spite of all this,

and in spite of the stormy indifference into which he had fallen, a sudden riot of anxiety was afoot in his mind, and before the members of the orchestra had finished tuning their instruments he found himself in the corridor, marching up and down in solitude, torn by anxiety. Failure hung above him, huge and imminent, and the noises of a world's derision were already in his ears. Nobody came near him, for every seat in the house was already taken, and he walked up and down, squeezing the perspiration from the palms of his hands until the last chord of the overture sounded with a crash. The scattered applause which followed died away, and he heard the rattle of the rising curtain. Then something dragged him to his seat again, and he was back in time to hear the first line spoken. He knew

his own play by rote, and could have recited it easily from start to finish, but he was in such a whirl of emotion that it carried no meaning to his mind. A delighted roar greeted the entrance of an old favourite of the town, and clap on clap of genial thunder filled the house as he spoke his lines. A rap sounded at the box door, and Mark rising mechanically to answer it confronted Francis, who came in cool as a cucumber, with a huge Paris brilliant shining in a great white field of shirt front.

"Nervous, dear boy?" he whispered as he closed the door behind him. "No need for that. The piece is all right. What I'm afraid of is that little baggage of a Delacour. I've come here out of her way. I believe that the very sight of me to-night would strike her dumb for a fortnight."

Now Glynne was on, and there was a louder roar than ever.

Mark's heart began to beat thickly, and seemed to threaten to cease to beat at all, for in a minute or two Esther was due upon the stage.

"There's old Belisle just in," whispered Francis, laying a hand on Mark's. "In the box opposite. That cub of a son of his, Lord Limesborough, is with him. That's a pair that don't often run coupled. They hate each other like blazes."

Mark looked straight before him, and saw nothing; but in a while he heard Esther's voice, sounding, as he thought, curiously thin and artificial. She was unknown, and came on amid the silence of the house. Mark's nerve came back to him, and he fixed his attention on the stage. Esther had never looked to greater advantage

than she did to-night, though there was something of a strained and frightened look in her face. She was evidently palpitating with nervousness, and before she had been upon the stage for two minutes there was a ghastly pause, in the midst of which the prompter's voice was heard, distinctly sibilant.

"I thought so," said Francis coolly. "She's going to crack up and send the whole thing to kingdom come."

Glynne, with the perfect self-possession of an old stager, spoke her speech for her, with an impromptu variation of his own, and carried her over the crisis. There was a great laugh at the conclusion of the speech, and the *débutante* was saved for the moment. She felt it, and recovered at least a partial self-possession, but in every turn

and movement she was marked "amateur," from head to heel.

"Take it easy, dear boy," Francis whispered, in utter ignorance of the ground of Mark's too evident emotion. "The play has got 'em by the wool already, and Miss Delacour will be out of the cast on Monday. Old Glynne will get a rare wigging from the press for having trusted her with the part at all, but that's all that will happen."

The scene, which in Jing's hands had run along in alternate mirth and tenderness, holding the house between tears and laughter, went for little or nothing here. Glynne played with the adroitest finesse; but he was powerless to lift Esther's spirit, and it was the woman and not the man who should have held the stage.

"That ought to have gone with a roar," Francis

whispered, "and now it's as flat as stale soda water."

Esther left the stage in dead silence, save for a faint and half-hearted clapping of hands from the box in which the Duke of Belisle and Lord Limesborough sat together. When the curtain fell there were sounds of disapprobation, mingled with the general applause ; but the performers were called one by one, and all the old favourites were warmly greeted. Esther's entry with Glynne was the signal for a mingled tumult.

"I thought she'd catch it," said Francis. "I can understand it being nervous work for you, old man, but you've no cause to be afraid. Did you see that beast Mayhill at his old tricks? Glynne told me about the row you had with him. He's trying to lead the

house against you, but the piece is too strong for him."

Mr. Walker Mayhill, indeed, sat in the middle of the third row from the orchestra, and had been conspicuous from the first. Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop sat at his right hand, and at any stroke of humour which set the house laughing they looked at each other with raised eyebrows of commiseration, and shrugged their shoulders, as who should say, "How piteously aged is this joke! How intolerably and sorrowfully stale!" Then, when the house was hushed by a touch of deeper feeling, Mr. Mayhill would utter faint moans of pity, audible for a few feet about him, and Mr. Wilstrop would wave his hands abroad in answer, with a gesture expressive of resigned contempt and enforced endurance. There is always present

on a first night in London a contingent known to the members of the theatrical profession as "the wreckers". These gentlemen make it their business to look out for any harmless chance phrase to which it is possible for an active but bestialised imagination to attach a vile signification. They make it their business to emphasise any accident which may, however slightly, imperil the smooth rendering of the play. They howl at every odd bit of unfamiliar costume. They are of the kidney who cry "Bogey!" and pretend hysterics at the entrance of the Ghost in "Hamlet". They are, of course, for the most part, an entirely brainless crew, but they have it in their power to do a good deal of mischief, and there is hardly a London manager in whose breast they have not at one time or another inspired a genuine terror. They

are sometimes, but not often, paid by spiteful people; but as a rule they do their clumsy spiriting impromptu, and for the mere pleasure of inflicting pain. Now, Mr. Walker Mayhill's person and identity were known to every member of this band of dunderheads in London. Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop, though less familiar, was certain to be recognised by many; and the two, in their own fashion, were playing to the gallery.

"Come with me," said Francis. "You needn't say a word, but you'll see me put an end to this."

He took up from a chair a light overcoat which he had laid aside on entering the box, and fumbling in the side pockets brought out a double handful of square envelopes. He showed them to Mark, who saw that they were addressed to the editors of various journals in London. Francis

gave him no idea of their contents, but briskly led the way into the corridor, which was now crowded with listeners and humming with conversation. Mark overheard a dozen scraps of talk as he hurried along at Francis' heels. "Pretty—yes, pretty as paint, but stupid as a stick." "Deuced clever first act, I call it." "Glynne ought to know his way about better. Where the dickens did he pick her up?" "Actress! She'll never make an actress if she lives to be a thousand." "Jolly nice little piece, though, so far." "If the Little Widow doesn't kill it." In the *foyer* the same verdict was audible everywhere.

"There's my man," said Francis. "You're out of this, dear boy, but you're welcome to do the looking on."

With this he shouldered his way through the

throng to where Mr. Mayhill stood, with his customary little ring of toadies round him, a glass of whisky and seltzer in one hand, and a lighted cigarette in the other.

"Mayhill," said Francis, "just a minute if you please. I've something here that will be interesting to you. You see these?" He shuffled the envelopes slowly under Mr. Mayhill's nose. The eminent critic nodded and smiled.

"Yes, darling boy. I see them. What about 'em?"

"Well, I'm not quite certain," the other answered, "that I shall send 'em, and I want your advice about it. Here's one addressed to your own editor. They're all alike. Just cast your eye over that, and give me your opinion."

Mr. Mayhill, having disembarrassed himself of his glass, adjusted his *pince-nez* and read the

letter. He had not gone far when his countenance changed; but he read it through to the end, and then looked up with half-closed venomous eyes.

"Do you think I shall have to send it, dear boy?"

"No," said Mr. Mayhill, with a little drawl, "I really don't see why you should."

"Well," returned Francis, with equal deliberation, "I think it very likely I shall take your tip, but I shall know all about it in an hour or two. You wouldn't advise me to burn 'em till the show's over, would you?"

"No," said Mr. Mayhill, pulling at his cigarette. "As you like, but I don't think you'll have any need to send 'em."

"Give Wilstrop the tip, will you, there's a good fellow. I must get away behind. That snake's

scotched," he said quietly, as he rejoined Mark. He thrust one of the envelopes into his hand. "Read that when you go back to the box."

Mark went back at once and opened the envelope with some curiosity. It was addressed "To the Editor of the *Times*," and bore that evening's date from the Sheridan Theatre. It ran thus :—

"SIR,—This letter is written in anticipation of the events of the evening. It is addressed not only to you, but to the editor of every daily journal in London, to the whole theatrical and sporting press, and to many of the leading provincial dailies. Should our anticipations be unrealised, the letter, of course, will not be forwarded. We expect to be forced to complain of the conduct of an eminent and widely-known dramatic

critic. This gentleman has twice, in the stalls on first nights at this house, acted as fugleman to a number of people who had visited the theatre with no other idea than to embarrass the actors, and, if possible, wreck the play. We do not name the person in question for excellent and obvious reasons, but there is no member of the theatrical profession who will not recognise him. Mr. Stanley, the author of 'The Little Widow,' has been brought into unfriendly collision with the critic, and we know by experience what we have to expect this evening. Should the anticipated interruptions occur, this letter will be shown to the offender at the earliest opportunity. Should they be continued after this warning we shall make our joint appeal to the honour and generosity of the English press. You may rely upon our *bonâ fides* when we state

that unless the conduct complained of is altogether intolerable our appeal will not be made.

"We are, sir,

"Your obedient servants,

"HERBERT GLYNNE, Lessee.

"REGINALD FRANCIS, Manager."

Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop was considerably surprised on his return to the stalls to find that the eminent critic had completely changed his standpoint, and was now amongst the most enthusiastic admirers of the play. It was Walker Mayhill's tenorino laugh that led the house, his kid-gloved hands that first came together in applause. At intervals he murmured "Admirable!" "Capital!" "Good, by Jove!" and the like encomiastic words and phrases. The smaller

fry were thick about him, and took their cue from him. The house rang with laughter and applause. There was no chance for the wreckers, for everybody in the stalls had caught the contagion of enjoyment, and the great mass of the audience was eager to miss nothing. Even Esther caught something of the spirit of the time, and sparkled here and there. But on the whole she was the kill-joy of the evening—not absolutely bad enough to ruin the play, but bad enough to damp its fires, at such unlucky moments as she walked among them. Luckily for her and for the author everybody about her was as steady as a rock. There are scores of excellent actors who, on the assumption of a new part, are struck through and through with the pangs of stage fright as terribly as any novice could be; but if there were any

such in the cast of "The Little Widow," she was mercifully saved from contact with them. Her business lay almost entirely with Glynne, and with that glorious old veteran, Forrest and his wife, all three seemed so steeled and armed as to have grown beyond fear in the face of any audience. But for their steadfast self-possession Heaven only knows what would have become of the hapless novice, who was letter perfect before any other person engaged in the performance had seen the play, and was now forced to wrench word by word from memory with a conscious effort.

The curtain fell on the final act, and there was no doubt left either as to the verdict on the piece or as to that on the performance of Miss Delacour. Glynne led her across, and in his company she was tolerably safe, for by this time everybody was

anxious to give him credit. But when once she had passed from the sight of the audience there was a terrific hubbub. Yells and catcalls and tempestuous cries of "Delacour! Delacour!" made the curtain wave and the very gaslights quiver. Esther thought she caught the meaning of the cries, and in her youthful vanity was eager to go back again. Glynne took her by the arm as she ran across to the prompt side, and she turned, struggling to free herself.

"They want me, Mr. Glynne, they want me!"

"Yes," said Glynne, "they want you very badly; but if you're not a born fool you don't want to go."

A good half of the male portion of the audience was friendly to the house, and strove to still the tumult by adding to it, bellowing "Author! Author!" with all the force of their lungs. Francis tore Mark from his box, and half forced, half led

him to the wing. A shirt-sleeved man pulled the curtain aside, Francis pushed the successful author gently forward, and before he knew it Mark was before the footlights, bowing his acknowledgments. There was no doubting the heartiness and sincerity of the greeting he received. He had made his fortune, and he knew it. He was under thirty, and he had touched the top of his ambition, and it meant nothing to him. He had dreamed, awake and asleep, of this supreme and splendid hour, and now it was his, and it had no value for him. The priceless jewel of success was of the poorest paste, a thing worth no man's picking up in the highway. It would have been far otherwise if Esther had been what he had always thought her; but she was worthless, and no jewel had any riches, no wine any sparkle, no feast any season.

He was back in the semi-darkness of the stage, but the clamorous cry of "Delacour! Delacour!" was rising still. Glynne still held a restraining hand on Esther's arm, but she struggled to release herself.

"It is my call, Mr. Glynne!" she said, between rage and tears. "I have a right to take it. You have no right to hold me back."

"As a matter of fact," said Glynne, "I'd a great deal rather you took it. Go along."

The shirt-sleeved man swung the curtain aside with a grin, and she walked proudly forward. The well-meaning folks were gone, and as the poor child entered, the vehement call changed in a second to a howl of execration and contumely, which might have fitted the advent of some monstrous criminal, but was never earned by the vilest duffer that

ever tortured a theatrical audience in the history of the world. She stood one moment amazed and horrified, and then her spirit rose. She walked with an aspect of complete calm to the centre of the stage, and there, after a single curtsy, stood motionless. The howl died down, and there were cries of "Shame!" and "Order!" The house settled slowly to a complete hush, and when perfect quiet was restored she walked calmly back, and directly she was hidden by the curtain ran to her dressing-room, and there tore the wedding-dress, in which, in the last act, the Little Widow had been richly habited, into mere rags and tatters. She did this with clenched teeth and blazing eyes, and having done it threw herself upon a couch, and cried with such an agony of shame and passion as she had never known.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"COME and see the governor," said Francis. "We've got to hold a council of war to-night."

Mark was staring in the direction Esther's flying figure had taken an instant before, and it needed the manager's hand upon his shoulder to awaken him to a sense of his surroundings.

"Never mind that little person," said Francis. "We've done with her, I fancy."

He put his arm confidentially through Mark's, and led him to Glynne's dressing-room.

The management of the Sheridan Theatre had not had the Duke of Belisle to back their enter-

prise for nothing, and the manager's apartment was quite a dream of beauty in its way. It was roomy and handsomely proportioned to begin with, and was now magnificently upholstered. There had been an installation of the electric light all over the house, and Glynne's room was perfectly illuminated. It was thronged with men when Mark and Francis arrived, and the air was thick with tobacco smoke. Champagne corks were popping, and there was a perfect babel of voices. Glynne's dresser was busy about him, helping him to return to his every-day semblance, and he undressed and dressed again in the middle of the talkative crowd as if he had been alone with his valet. Everybody was enthusiastic about the play, and everybody was in a state of high and unnecessary excitement with

respect to the manner of Miss Delacour's final disappearance from the scene.

"One of these days," said Mr. Walker Mayhill, "that little girl will do. With a year or two's experience she'll make her mark. You're not going on with her, Glynne?"

He had not yet had time to forget the episode of the letters; but he was delightfully unconscious in manner, and Glynne, who was as old a soldier as himself, accepted the hollow truce with an equal appearance of complacency.

"No," said Glynne, "she's been too ambitious, and I've been too tolerant. We shall have to cast about for somebody else."

"Upon my word," said Mr. Mayhill, "I thought at one time that the whole thing was going to be disastrous. I protest, my darling fellow, that

my heart was in my mouth for the first half-hour."

"I know it was, dear boy," said Glynne, with considerable dryness. "A good many of us had it there in the course of the first act. It never rose so high after that, did it?"

"A charming play," said Mr. Mayhill, unabashed. "A delightful play. If the performance had only been free of that one little blot the night would have reminded one of poor Jones' triumphs in the little house off the Tottenham Court Road."

A slanting mirror had shown him the reflections of Mark and Francis, as they stood close behind him; but he feigned ignorance of their presence. After the warning he had received it was not his game to show an open enmity to the man who had insulted him so grossly. Mr. Mayhill had made

and found many enemies in his time, and in the acts of spite practice makes perfect as in other matters. Mr. Mayhill could write you a whole column in review of a new play, in which no phrase should express condemnation, in which, indeed, each separate sentence, separately reviewed, should seem friendly, whilst the total result should be that no manager who had read his notice would venture to touch your work. He could hint a doubt and hesitate dislike better than any man of his age, and this faculty had made him feared and powerful. The unprejudiced observer, regarding him, was at a loss to decide whether his insincerity or his impudence deserved the fuller tribute. He had himself written dramas, and had himself bespattered himself with anonymous adulation. He had praised his dearest enemy with a boyish

abandon when it paid, and when it paid had stabbed his dearest friend in the back. Nobody writes the history of the modern press with candour, but probably nobody ever did, with candour, write the history of his own time. Perhaps the Puff and Dangle, and the Sir Fretful Plagiary of Sheridan were real people; but then Sheridan was very strong, and could hit anybody with impunity. Reade's Snarl and Soaper were behind that master's time; and, in fact, it has been the general habit of the angered humorist to flog the dead ass who has no kick in him rather than the living jackal, who knows so well how to bite.

Glynne took Mark about, introducing him everywhere. The champagne corks went popping, and the grape juice foamed, and everybody was in the best and gayest of spirits. By-and-by Mark's

heart grew warm by these adventitious aids, and the future lay before him, roseate and smiling. He had nature and brains enough to know that the whole thing was in fact an illusion; but he welcomed it, and for half an hour he was feverishly excited and happy. Then the crowd melted away, and finally Mark, Glynne and Francis were left alone, save for one man who sat half somnolent in an armchair. This personage, who was perfectly attired, had the air of a groom in his master's clothes. He was close-cropped, as if he had just left gaol, but a sweeping black moustache denied that fancy, and his hands, which sparkled with valuable rings, were well shaped, beautifully cared for, and delicate. If, like the Northern Cobbler, he had "looked wall eyed at his noase," he would have "seead 'im a-gettin' o' fire," and the whole

expression of his face was sottish and hoggish. Glynne looked from this gentleman to Francis, and shrugged his shoulders. Francis looked from Glynne to the gentleman, and shrugged *his* shoulders. The two spoke by a common impulse in the self-same phrase.

"Beastly little cad!"

The gentleman thus characterised awoke himself by the unusual but efficient method of inserting the red-hot end of his cigar in his mouth. He rose, spluttering imprecations in a groom's accent, and demanded a drink. Francis poured out a glass of champagne for him. He rinsed his mouth with a portion of its contents, and spat it out upon the carpet.

"I'm d——d if I wasn't asleep," he said. "Look here, Glynne, I want to have a little talk with you."

He approached the manager with uncertain gait, but lurching against a chair set both hands on the back of it and brought himself to anchor. "Hillo! I don't know this johnny."

"This is Mr. Stanley, the author of to-night's piece. This, Mr. Stanley, is the Marquis of Limesborough."

"Devilish clever fellow, too," said the marquis, looking at Mark. "Seen a widow or two, haven't you? He knows their little dodges." To Glynne, and to the company at large: "So do I, by ——. There's precious few of 'em get over me. I'm not one of your clever devils," he explained. "I never went in for intellectual, but I know a woman and I know a horse, and I can put my props up. And now you've got me, damme, what d'ye want to say to me?"

"Have a drink, Limesborough," said Glynne.

"So I will," returned the nobleman. "Tha's a magnum in the corner. We'll have magnum. Magnum isn't much between four. Wish you johnnies wouldn't shift about so. Makes it ever so much harder to count you. Irishman's lill pig. Bally good yarn, that. Bust Irishman's lill pig. Where's magnum?"

"Oh, you don't want a magnum," said Francis, with contemptuous good humour. "We've got all we want here. You have a little. That'll do your business."

"'Conomy," said the marquis, with a hiccup. "All right! you uncork it, Francis. Strike me," he added, lurching suddenly into the chair by which he had sustained himself, "I'm a bit squiffy. The o'e man noticed that, hour ago.

He's down on me, Glynne. Had beas'ly row this afternoon. Wouldn't speak t'me when I met him in the lobby." Here he went to sleep for perhaps ten seconds, and added on waking with an air of luminous explanation: "Lobby. Jus' outside here. Sher'an Theatre, you know."

"Oh, yes," said Glynne, "I know. So you've been rowing with the duke again?"

"No!" said the marquis, in emphatic denial. "Never row with anybody. Never. All same, I can put my props up, 'n good many of 'em know it. Can't put 'em up to governor," he explained. "Man can't hammer 's father. 'Tisn't respectable. Labourin' classes, that sor' o' thing. Not in good society."

"Your lordship's sentiments," said Mark, "deserve applause."

"S'pose they do," the marquis retorted. "That any business yours?"

"None in the world," said Mark.

"No malice!" cried the nobleman. "I like this johnny. Have drink. Where's that magnum?"

Simple as his speech was, he gave it the finest seasoning. It was barely an intellectual food for babes, but he flavoured it with cayenne and cognac —a kind of devilled pap. There was no vulgarer lout in London, and none stupider. Stripped of his title and his fortune he would have been tolerated in no decent assembly of shop-walkers. The congregation of an average taproom would have held him in despite. His ill-breeding would have stirred the unanimous gall of the occupants of a cabman's shelter. But—he was the Marquis of Limesborough and heir to the dukedom of

Belisle. If he survived his father he would inherit one of the great fortunes of Europe, one of the noblest and most honoured names, and a string of titles and splendid dignities which filled half a page in the *British Peerage*. For these excellent and sufficient reasons his companionship was sought by many, and endured by more.

"Can't make the old man out at all," he said rather plaintively. "We're always havin' rows. He said to-night—we had a box, Sher'an Theatre, you—know. Said I wasn't a gen'l'm'n. —— it all, I'm good as *he* is. He wasn't the Duke of Belisle till *his* old man cracked up, was he? Very well, then, I shan't be Duke of Belisle till *he* cracks up. Where's the diff.?"

"His grace," said Glynne, with a purposed assumption of old-fashioned dignity, "is a gentle-

man of the old school. And you, Limes.," with a sudden imitation of the sot before him, "you're a gentleman of the new style, eh?"

"Gad!" said the marquis, oblivious of the satire, "you've hit it. I shall go and see him to-morrow, and tell him that. I can't think of these things. It's take me or leave me. I don't reckon on being a dab at language and the classics, and all that bally rot, but I can put my props up."

"Therein," said Francis, "your excellence displays itself indeed."

"I'll take *you* on," the marquis retorted, "in a twelve foot ring, any day. So don't *you* talk. I'm not particular about gloves, and I'm game for a go with the raw 'uns."

He sat for a minute in offended dignity, and looked round for a means of vengeance on too

outspoken satire. It occurred to him on a sudden that he could not more powerfully clench his retort than by smoking with a look of tranquillity, and a half-burned cigar which had already ignited the handsome tablecloth before him lay conveniently to hand. He seized it, therefore, and gave one majestic pull, only to discover that he had repeated his former error, and that the lighted end was between his teeth. He got up, screaming, cursing and stamping, but by-and-by recovered himself, and asked, with a sweet confidential air :—

"Glynne, you're a man of the world. Tell me which end this bally thing goes off at."

He had some champagne, and shortly afterwards lurched away.

"Is that an average specimen of the modern

English nobleman?" Mark asked, as the young gentleman went cannoning from one side of the corridor to the other.

"Oh!" said Glynne lightly, "there are all sorts in the peerage, just as there are everywhere else. There *are* some dreadful outsiders amongst them, and he's one of them. If you want to see any more of his sort ——"

"I don't," said Mark.

"I could throw a net that would catch you half a dozen like him. Perhaps not quite as drunk and beastly, but pretty nearly."

"Well," said Francis, interrupting him, "it's after midnight, and we must decide on something. I don't think we can afford to try that Delacour again."

"No," Glynne admitted. "That's a certainty.

But it's a pretty long part, and I don't know anybody who's fit for it who could have it ready in the time."

"Sixty sides of type-written stuff," mused Francis. "No; it'll take more than a common swallow to get that down. What's to be done?"

"I'll tell you," said Mark. "I know the very girl for it. She knows the part already. She played it in the country to my perfect satisfaction, and I have no doubt that you'd be satisfied with her."

"Who is she?" Glynne asked.

"She is a Miss Broom," Mark answered. "Miss Gingestra Broom."

"I know her," Francis broke in. "Daughter of old Broom at the Birmingham Royal. Very clever little girl, and rather pretty. Yes," he

added, turning to Glynne for confirmation, "I think Miss Broom might do."

"Very well," said his chief, "if Mr. Stanley can give you her address you'd better run down by the first train to-morrow, and see if you can make arrangements with her. We've changed a lot of the business, and you'd better call her scenes for rehearsal at twelve o'clock on Monday."

"All right," said the lieutenant. "We can be back by that time."

So that matter was settled; and Mark, sore-hearted as he was, went away a little comforted by the thought that he had been able to do a good turn to so old a friend as Jing. If once she had an opportunity to appear in London he was confident that she would succeed there, and he knew how she thirsted for an opportunity of

distinction, for the sake of her father and mother, who were rapidly getting old, and had made but scant provision for the future. But his thoughts were soon back with Esther, and when he had made the first excuse he could think of he slipped away from his companions and paced the streets alone. A thin drizzle had begun to fall, and the moist pavement glimmered cheerlessly in the lamplight. But he took no heed of the weather, and marched on with his own disconsolate thoughts. He was not very well acquainted with London, but he knew generally that he was walking in the direction of Limesborough Gardens. He made many detours, and more than once lost his way altogether. At last he came unexpectedly upon the place, and stood before the gate of the house in which Esther lived. It was all dark and quiet,

and by this time it was near two o'clock. The drizzle had grown to a fine persistent rain, but he stood there purposeless and miserably indifferent for a quarter of an hour. Then came the clamp of a policeman's highlows on the pavement, and the officer, approaching, turned the light of his bull's-eye full upon him and looked him up and down.

"Waiting for somebody?" said the policeman.

"No," Mark answered.

"What's your business here?" the officer inquired.

"None," said Mark.

"Then," retorted the officer, "perhaps you'd better go home."

"Perhaps I had," Mark answered, and walked away, followed by the suspicious officer until he

had cleared the Crescent and had made off slowly towards his hotel. It was during that homeward walk that he experienced the first touch of definite resolve since his parting with Esther. He had easily learned to love the child in spite of all her monkey irresponsibilities, her greed, and her ingratitude. These had all, somehow, been invested with a childish charm, so that in Esther they had never looked downright frankly ugly, as they would have done in the case of ninety-nine people in a hundred. From loving the child he had gone on to falling almost imperceptibly in love with the budding woman. His discovery of that fact would probably have been delayed, even for a year or two, if the worthless and charming little person had never taken it into her head to run away from home and desert her benefactors. That her silly vanity had

narrowly failed to ruin the ambition of his lifetime went absolutely for nothing at this moment, for the discovery of her worthlessness filled him with a pain so poignant that life and its common interests seemed to have come to a standstill. And now he had knelt for the last time before the empty shrine, and the resolution at which he had arrived was that he would make it the first and most urgent business of his life to live her memory down. He would expel her from his heart, and, as far as might be, from his memory.

Esther herself was not in the least concerned what Mark might think or feel. She had far other reflections to occupy her mind. In spite of Mrs. Jordan's blandishments she cried for hours. That good lady had seen the piece from a seat in the dress circle, and was full of enthusiasm.

"You was lovely all through, my dear. Nobody can tell *me* anything about the theatre, for I've been at it all my life. I've seen everybody in everything. I've seen all the leading ladies when they had their beginnings, and not one of them, when they started, was anything like as good as you are. And then," pursued Mrs. Jordan, thrown off her guard by the warmth of her own feelings, "they were such a hugly lot compared with you. Why, my dearie, in the frocks you wore in the second and third acts you looked as pretty as an angel."

Esther could, under ordinary conditions, and habitually did, consume and assimilate a good deal of this sort of diet, but to-night she had no appetite for it, and she cried passionately to Mrs. Jordan to go away.

"I won't be bothered with you. Hold your tongue."

"You won't be bothered long in this way, dearie," said her companion soothingly. "They won't be able to afford the money to insult you that way every night. It's an expensive business to send two or three hundred people into the pit and gallery."

"What do you mean?" cried Esther. She had thrown herself in an abandonment of rage and wounded vanity full length upon the bed, with her face hidden among the lace-edged pillows. But she sat bolt upright as she put this question. "What do you mean? Paid? Who paid?"

"Why, my dearie," returned Mrs. Jordan, "there was two or three hundred people sent in to-night to hiss, and paid to do it. Bless you, you don't

know the profession yet. Poor little innocent 'eart! It was that Miss What's-her-name's doing, who was to have played the part at first. You don't suppose as she'd stand by quiet, and see her own nose put out o' joint for nothing? Not she. And what'd make her so very riled about it was to be put on one side for a person as is much younger and prettier than she ever was."

There was a twofold comfort here. In the first place the passion of wrath with which Esther bubbled had now a direct object before it, and in the second place the belief was opened to her that she had not really failed at all.

"Now, don't you cry no more, dear," said Esther's counsellor. "You let me give you a drop of comfort. I'll get cook to make some port negus for you, and if you don't mind we'll have

it together. I'm a bit out of sorts, with this cold night and the agitation as I've gone through. Oh, if I'd been nigh that woman when I heard them wretches hissing, I should have scratched her eyes out."

The bell was rung and the port negus commanded. Miss Delacour's passion gradually simmered down, and by the time the medicine prescribed was ready she had dried her eyes, and only an occasional involuntary sob gave audible token of the subsiding tempest. Her nose and her eyelids were red and swollen with prolonged weeping, and she was by no means as attractive to look at as she usually was.

"I'm a perfect howling fright," she declared, surveying herself in a looking-glass. "But I don't care. That'll be all right to-morrow."

In spite of this prophecy, the traces of the disturbance over-night were visible enough when her venerable patron and protector called next day. The day was fine after the rain, and the duke arrived on foot, carrying with him a little jewelled arrow through an emerald heart rimmed with brilliants. This had been intended as a tribute to success had Esther succeeded, and now it served as well for a sugar-plum to take away the taste of the nauseous medicine of failure.

"You have been taking last night too much to heart, I see," said his grace, as he sat down opposite to her.

"I'm sure I haven't," she returned, half sullen and half defiant. "You don't think I care for that woman's spite. She wouldn't have sent in

a whole crowd of people to hiss me if she hadn't known that I should have made a success."

"Did you make a success, my dear?" asked his grace drily.

He raised his eyebrows, and his eyeglass fell. He groped uncertainly for it, and having found it returned it to its place. Esther was staring at him angrily.

"Success! Of course I made a success! It was only that wretched woman's spite. She paid people to come in and make a noise."

"Well, well," said his grace, "I have heard of such things. But you mustn't be down-hearted, my dear. We'll try again a little later on—try something simpler, and I've no doubt that we shall do very well in time."

"I'm not going to give in," said Esther. "I

know I was a bit nervous, but who wouldn't be on a first night in front of such a house as that? I shan't be nervous on Monday, though."

"No," said the duke. "You won't be nervous on Monday. You've not heard from Mr. Glynne, I suppose?"

"No," said Esther, a little surprised at the question; "I haven't. What has he got to say to me?"

"He spoke of sending you a message," his grace responded. "But in the meantime look at this." He laid the little morocco case he had brought with him on the table, and opening it displayed its dainty interior of pearl-coloured satin and ruby velvet. "There's a pretty trifle for you."

"Oh!" cried Esther, and rising, leaned across

the table and drew it towards her with both hands. "Oh! oh! Is that a real emerald?"

"Yes," said his grace with a dry twinkle, and nodding his shaking head a little, "it is a real emerald."

"And the diamonds! are they real, too?"

"I believe it is all real," returned the duke.

"I must put that on at once," said Esther, and straightway fled to a mirror, where she fixed the arrow at her throat, and postured in changing attitudes to watch the sheen of the pearls reflected in the glass. Only one regret marred her joy in this new possession, and that was that she had been silly enough to cry so much over-night and so to spoil her beauty. The gift sent all thoughts of the giver from her mind, and she attitudinised like a peacock. The old gentleman watched her,

amused and cynical, until at length, by mere accident, she caught the expression of his face as seen in the glass; and with that intuition which was not the least dangerous part of her, read its meaning in a flash. She was not quite sure that his glance had not met her own, and she was altogether too good an actress socially to let him think that she had been reminded of a duty. She went on with her attitudes and sidelong glances for a minute; and then, taking the jewelled trifle from its place, she turned round upon him and kissed it towards him. Then she began to play about him with all manner of childish *minauderies*, saying how good he was, and how generous.

"Nobody ever thought of giving me pretty things before, and you give me everything I want,

and lots, lots of things that I should never dream of asking for. You *are* good and kind. It must be nice to be as good as you are, and to have such heaps of money, and to make everybody happy and contented. Isn't it nice, now, tell me?" She sat down beside him, having laid the little brooch upon the table, and clasping her hands hung them lightly on his shoulder, looking into his face with earnest, childish, worshipful eyes, and wishing with all her heart meanwhile that her nose and eyelids were less red and swollen. "Isn't it nice, you dear old duke? Now tell me."

"Yes," the old gentleman answered, pinching her cheek. "It's very nice."

"Do you know," said Esther thoughtfully, "I should like to be a duchess." The venerable beau smiled at her quite placidly, but with such an

underlying richness of enjoyment that Esther understood.

"Should you?" he asked. "Why should you like to be a duchess?"

"Oh, duchesses have carriages, and servants, and horses, and jewels, and castles, and they go to Court—oh, I should love to go to Court, and have a train as long as the room, as long as two sides of it, and have ostrich feathers in my hair, and be all over—oh! all over—jewels. Then I could always have everything I wanted, and do everything I pleased."

"Ah!" said the duke, "that is your simple ambition, is it?"

The Duke of Belisle had been young, and now was old; and all his life long, from his earliest manhood up till now, he had known and studied the

ways of the daughters of the horseleech. He had spent enough on that graceless tribe to have founded an endowed hospital; but he had done it to please himself, and not in the least because any of the hungry sisterhood had ever imposed upon him for a moment. He knew every weapon in their armoury, every glance and lure; and now, in his old age, he took a cynical pleasure in walking amongst their wiles. Esther lacked the old gentleman's experience; but she had her own simplicity to fall back on, her youth, her innocence, and her want of knowledge of the world; and these served her in almost as good stead. The duke laughed; and Esther, laughing in answer, skipped away, and, returning the jewel to its case, snapped the spring fastening, with a look and gesture of infantile triumph. At that moment a ring sounded at the

bell, and a little later the albino parlour-maid, solemn and ageless, presented a note to Miss Delacour.

"You'll let me read this?" she asked the duke; and he assenting with a nod, she broke the seal, and after a mere glance at the contents of the letter cast it passionately on the floor.

"Oh!" said his grace. "What is this?"

"That man!" she cried. "That wretch! That Glynne! He has the impertinence to tell me that I am not to play again. He says he has engaged Miss Gingestra Broom to take my place." The name of Miss Gingestra Broom was pronounced with the supremest scorn. "I'll let him know about that! Jing! Jing Broom! The dowdy little old-fashioned creature! Oh! it's abominable! I can't put up with it."

"What do you propose to do?" his grace inquired.

"You gave me the part," said Esther. "They dare not take it away from me."

"My dear," his grace answered tranquilly, "I gave you the sweetmeat because you cried for it. I told you it would disagree with you, and it has done so."

"I'm—I'm not ——" Esther began, stammering, with a look of horrified astonishment. "I'm not to play the Little Widow any more?"

"No, my dear. You are not to play the Little Widow any more. Everybody knew you couldn't do it; but you wanted it, and so I let you have it."

The corners of her mouth fell piteously, and her eyes began to fill with tears. She said nothing, but looked at him with a face almost comically distorted by her grief. The bright tears welled over and ran

fast. The duke took up the one glove he had discarded, drew it on, and adjusted it to a nicety.

"You will have your cry out," he said, "and spoil yourself for a day or two. When that is over, and you are fit to be seen again, you can let me know. Good-afternoon. There are more things in the world than the Little Widow, and disappointment is sometimes a very wholesome bitter."

CHAPTER XIX.

ALL the world knew perfectly well that the Duke of Belisle and his eldest and only surviving son, the Marquis of Limesborough, were not on good terms with each other; but few people knew how virulent a hatred existed between them, until that memorable day when they quarrelled openly in the library of the Five-year-old Club. The duke had joined that institution when it was composed entirely of elderly men, and the marquis had joined it when the elderly men had practically, if not explicitly, retired from it. His grace knew nothing of the character that the club had acquired under

the management of Captain Heaton, and of an afternoon the place was almost always deserted, save for one or two old fogies who read the newspapers and magazines. The drinking and gambling contingent came in towards midnight, and from that hour on till four or five in the morning the billiard room and card rooms were lively and noisy enough.

The Duke of Belisle and the Earl of Bridgewater had been the most influential of the initial committee of the club; and the venerable earl, together with his son, Lord Hawnes, was present at the explosion between the marquis and his father. It appears that Lord Limesborough, with four of his companions, had stopped in Pall Mall to argue a question of equine pedigree. This matter became complicated by the question as to what horse ran

third in the Oaks of a particular year. Bets on the double dispute were freely offered and taken, and the voices of the band were so noisy and emphatic as to disturb the inmates of the library.

The Marquis of Limesborough was by far the eldest of the whole contingent. He was verging on forty, and his companions were all titled youngsters, who ranged in age from two to eight and twenty. They all had a reverence for Limesborough, inasmuch as he could drink harder, was fouler-mouthed, displayed less sense of shame in any society, and would one of these days have immensely more money than any of them. They were all more or less pupils in his school, and the probabilities are that they would have been content with his decision on a single point; but, as it happened, he gave a verdict against both the dis-

putants, deciding in favour of one party with regard to the question of pedigree, and in favour of the other in regard to the identity of the horse who ran third. All the disputants being convinced that the two questions were locked together, and that the solution of one decided the other, they refused to accept this decision, and the squabble became so animated as to cause quite a block in the road. A listening cabman was so polite as to offer to decide both questions for the price of a pot. The marquis opened upon the cabman the batteries of satire with such effect that a bishop on his way to the Athenæum, who had at one time been a frequent guest at the table of the Duke of Belisle, was so hideously afraid of a public recognition that he bolted into a club of which he was not a member, and asked there for a fellow-digni-

tary of the Church whom he knew not to be a member either.

The voices of the disputants were so loud that the whole ribald encounter was heard clearly in the library of the Five-year-old Club. Lord Hawnes, a man of the strictest morals and of pronounced evangelical tendencies, rose and rang the bell, with intent to give instructions to a waiter to remove the disputants. At the sound of the marquis's volley the duke shrugged his shoulders and said :—

"That is my cub, Bridgewater. I believe," he added a moment later, "that the blackguard is coming here."

Lord Limesborough's noisy voice was indeed heard in the corridor, and almost immediately he burst into the room, demanding loudly as he

came the whereabouts of the *Stud Book* and *Ruff's Guide*. He was not intoxicated, or near it, but he had been drinking, and his companions were in like condition with himself. Lord Hawnes was standing with his hand upon the bell-pull, and as they entered he rang a second peal. A liveried waiter answered the summons.

"Will you kindly remind these gentlemen," he said, in his evangelical platform manner, "that this is the library of the club, that silence is enjoined by placards upon the wall, and that smoking is prohibited here?"

The Marquis of Limesborough hearing this wheeled round, and stared at the reprover from head to foot.

"You be d——d," said the marquis. "Mind your own business."

Being almost—though not quite—sober, he wore his drawing-room manners in his father's presence.

"How do?" he added ungraciously, nodding at his sire.

"Smoking is not allowed in the library, my lord," said the waiter respectfully.

"All right, johnny," his lordship responded. "We shall clear in a crack. Where's the *Stud Book?*"

The waiter having served his turn retired, and the marquis and his companions having secured the two volumes from the shelves made hurried search in their pages, and discovered that Lord Limesborough was in the right in both instances. The youngest of the crew, being an angry dunderhead by nature, and more excited by drink than any other member of the party, flatly declined to

accept the dictum of the authorities to which he had appealed. At this the marquis, who was never slow to anger, forgot his parlour manners, and returned freely to the speech which had grown natural to him. He belched a mouthful of shameless insults at the disputant, a string of phrases so foul that a drunken coster would hardly have employed them in the hearing of respectable people. The duke sprang to his feet and struck him roundly on the chest with a walking cane which he had been nursing in his tremulous old hands.

"You blackguard! You blackguard!" he cried, with blazing eyes. "You cur, and cad, and hound!"

For the moment the old man was young again, and his head forgot its senile, palsied tremor. For one astonished, wrathful second Limesborough

glared back at him; and then, but for the intervention of his comrades, would have struck him. But they, though taken as much by surprise as himself, were too quick for him.

"Look here, Limes.," said one of them, clinging on to him with both hands, "this won't do. This ain't good enough. No; it really ain't, now. We can't stand by and see a man going for his governor."

"Governor be d——d!" roared the marquis. "I'll teach him to lay a hand on me."

"Leave my presence, sir," said the duke, recovering his self-possession as swiftly as he had lost it. "Go back to the society of your pot and stable companions. If you were not—most unhappily for me—my son, I should disdain to waste a word upon you."

The marquis said, in his own forcible manner, that he was a better man than his father had ever been. He so garnished this plain statement that it took him half a minute to deliver it.

"I think," said the duke, "that some of you young gentlemen are known to me. I know you, I fancy," he continued, singling out one of the group. "Your grandfather and your father were friends of mine, and both were gentlemen. If you choose to be known by any other name, you can hardly take a quicker way to the contempt of all well-bred people than by associating with my son."

The marquis rose to fever heat at this, and the eight restraining hands had their work cut out for them. But though Lord Limesborough had been gifted by nature with a physique of extraordinary splendour, and though he was still known as one of

the quickest boxers and hardest hitters in London, he could never stay beyond a single round. His wind gave way to the struggle, and he stood panting, with his clean-shaven, handsome, animal face scarlet with rage and exertion, and the sweat standing in beads upon his brow. The duke had watched the struggle with an eye of scornful tranquillity, and when it was over he turned to the aged earl, his compeer.

"You knew that ruffian's mother, Bridgewater?" he said. "I declare to you, before heaven, if I had not known her to be an angel of purity and goodness I would not believe this fellow was my son."

Lord Limesborough panted that that cock wouldn't fight. He cited with unnecessary veiled emphasis, "Like father, like son," and cast a broad reflection upon the duke's own mode of life.

"I have lived to amuse myself," said his father, "but I have amused myself like a gentleman. One may be happy in this world without adopting the manners and language of a drunken potboy."

"Look here, Limes.," said one of the men, when the marquis had broken out once more, "I'm not going to stand this. I tell you to your face,"—he did not, as a fact, for he was half choking from behind the gentleman he addressed with two brawny hands which grasped him by the collar—"I tell you to your face that you're behaving in a jolly bad way, and that when we've got you out of this I shall wash my hands of you."

At this another man took heart of grace.

"No, d——n it all, Limes., you're not a gentleman. Upon my word, you're not."

He made this announcement with an air of

manful surprise and discovery, and shook his head at his late leader and boon companion sorrowfully.

"Your set is better than I fancy, Limesborough," said the duke. "I advise them heartily to permit you to disgrace yourself alone."

The marquis was in too decided a minority to persist, and he sullenly permitted himself to be withdrawn. It pierced even *his* crude intelligence when the two men who had repudiated him within the club accosted a cabman and drove off without a farewell word. It hit him even harder when the weaker-kneed ones pleaded an engagement which he knew to be non-existent.

"Oh, that be hanged!" he said. "Come and have some fizz. Here! I'll stand a dinner. Come and order what you like."

But even the weak-kneed ones stood firm to their imaginary engagement.

"Can't do it, dear old chappie. Delighted if I could, but a promise is a promise, don't you know, and ——"

He turned away from them with an oath, and plunging into another club, called for champagne and drank by himself gloomily in a corner until he was carried out by the waiters, propped up in a cab, and driven home. This, too, brought about a severe humiliation, for the first thing which greeted his aching sight next day was a letter from the club secretary, stating that the committee had been sitting on the previous evening, and had unanimously issued an instruction that the Marquis of Limesborough should be requested to remove his name from the books. The whole story got

abroad with many additions and exaggerations. There were men in town who knew other men who had been eye-witnesses at the scene of a diabolical thrashing inflicted by the marquis on his aged father. There were men who knew men who had met one of the duke's doctors and were able to report on irrefragable authority that the venerable duke was *in extremis*. The Marquis of Limesborough was not much seen in respectable society; but he knew crowds of easy-going, haphazard-living young fellows, who, in spite of the empty and aimless lives they led, were honourable and courageous, and who showed their disapproval of his reported conduct in the most unmistakable fashion. They cut him dead in the street, they turned their backs upon him at table in his favourite supper resort in the Strand. He found the cold

shoulder preferred everywhere. Even Tom, Dick, and Harry of the second- and third-rate range of his acquaintance were awkward in their greetings; and after a week or two, during which he had in vain striven to live down the memory of that unfortunate afternoon, he went to his country seat, taking with him two or three of the staunchest and most determined of his toadies—a little handful of gentlemen who would have chummed with Beelzebub for the sake of eleemosynary champagne.

The marquis, who had inherited his mother's fortune, was well-to-do, and a scattering generosity was perhaps the best point he had about him. His friends got the best of everything the world afforded, and being none too well off themselves, were shut up for a week or two in measureless content. But in a little while their host found

the quiet and retirement of the country pall upon him. To drink in the dining-room, to drink in the smoking-room, to drink at billiards, was but a poor and feeble imitation of London life, where half a dozen raffish clubs and as many raffish restaurants were open eighteen hours out of the twenty-four for his delectation. The country was frost-bound, and there was no hunting. His lordship, though theoretically an upholder of the game laws, had but the poorest preserves. All the stories told in the smoking-room at night were drearily old. Thus an intelligent man of the party, a bright young journalist ruined for life by a premature acquaintance with the sporting aristocracy, described their evening afterwards by a solitary quotation from Macbeth, slightly altered to suit the case. "We sat each night with chest-

nuts in our lap, and munched, and munched, and munched." Students in slang will recognise the aptness of the citation.

It happened one morning that the marquis, quite out of tune with himself and his surroundings, set out to walk alone on the high road which led from his own gates to the county town, some seven miles distant. He had not brought with him even a dog for a companion, and he was completely hipped and out of spirits. A pint of champagne before breakfast and a repetition of the dose at the morning meal had not quite banished the nauseous and aching memory of last night's brandy and soda, and he was so queasy over his pet meerschaum that he deposed it in favour of a cigarette. He was not easily amenable to shame, but he had had perforce a good many hours of sobriety to live,

though since he had banished himself from London, and more especially in the morning, he had been forced to stand in the presence of a magisterial better self, who told him in forcible and more convincing language than any one outside him could have found that he had acted very much like a coward and a cur. Perhaps the only moral qualities the poor fellow respected were those which belonged to courage; and if he could at all have put upon paper the sentiments which filled his mind at quiet and reflective times, he would certainly have written to his father to apologise for conduct which he himself felt to be indefensible. But the duke, with all his vices, was a lover of the arts, and a terrible stickler about forms of expression. His eldest son had never been able to address him without awak-

ening a spirit of irony ; and the marquis, much as he repented, knew himself too clumsy, too stupid, to convey to his angry father a sense of his own humiliation and distress.

He was ploughing along the frozen road, hitting savagely with the walking-stick he carried at the withered wayside weeds and hedgerows, when, rounding a bend in the road, he heard the frosty clatter of a horse's feet and the hum of distant wheels. He looked up for an instant, and failing to recognise the occupants of the approaching dogcart, swung on again, flogging at the hedges as he walked. The morning sun was strong enough to have turned the night's hoar frost into diamond dewdrops, and he bedewed himself plenteously, thrashing at the higher branches as he walked. The dogcart came to a sudden stand-

still, and a mellow, portly-sounding voice hailed the pedestrian.

"Good-day, my lord; I hope I see you well."

Limesborough looked up, and recognised Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop, who, in furred gloves and an overcoat faced with astracan at the cuffs and collar, looked like a genial personification of the continental waiter. By his side sat a delightfully pretty girl, whom Lord Limesborough thought he remembered to have seen before. Her cheeks were aglow with the wind and the frost, and her eyes sparkled as brightly as the glittering drops of melting hoar frost on the hedges.

"What brings you here?" asked his lordship somewhat surlily.

"My company is playing down here at the Royal," said Mr. Wilstrop, pointing his whip back

across his shoulder in the direction of the town. "I shall be proud to place a box at your lordship's disposal on any evening if you should care to come over. We play 'Macbeth' to-night, 'Othello' to-morrow, 'The Gamester' Wednesday."

"I've seen all that sort," said his lordship gruffly, taking a new cigarette from his case and lighting it at the stump of his old one. "Introduce me, Wilstrop."

"Pleasure!" cried the manager, beaming. "I think the young lady at my side is not altogether unknown to your lordship. I think I saw your lordship in the box of his grace the Duke of Belisle on the night of the first production of 'The Little Widow'."

"Oh, of course," said the marquis. "I was a bit sprung that night, and don't remember much

about it. You ought to be a relative of mine, Miss Delacour. You've got my name, any way, and I never heard of any other family that carried it."

"This is the Marquis of Limesborough, Miss Delacour," said Mr. Wilstrop with a wave of the hand at once lordly and deferential,—"the eldest son of the Duke of Belisle, whom you know already."

Esther bowed in answer to the nod the marquis gave her, and surveyed the son of her noble patron with some interest, thinking him extremely unlike his father.

"Miss Delacour in the company?" asked his lordship.

"Miss Delacour," returned Mr. Wilstrop, "is accepting a course of dramatic tuition at my hands. If I may be allowed to say so in her

presence, she is a young lady who has a great dramatic future before her, but she lacks experience. That deficiency we are endeavouring to supply."

"Playing to-night, Miss Delacour?" asked the marquis.

"Yes," she answered, panting. "A good-for-nothing part. Just a line or two. I'm Fléance."

"You're what?" asked the marquis.

"I'm playing Fléance," she said, with a face of comic disgust. "It's a boy's part."

"Oh!" said his lordship, heightening into interest for the first time. "I'll come and have a look at you. Keep the stage box for me, Wilstrop. I've got three or four fellows staying with me at my place, and we'll all come over. You ought to look doosid well in tights," he added, nodding at Esther as he spoke.

The girl flushed a little under his impertinent gaze, and made a new face of undisguised disdain; and Lord Limesborough, with a laugh, set out upon his walk again, shouting across his shoulder that he would drive over after dinner.

He kept his promise, and the dignity of Shakespearian tragedy suffered somewhat from the presence of his party, who made audible comments on the text and the aspect and action of the characters. They were twice called to order by an indignant house, which was robbed of fear by the strength of numbers.

Miss Delacour was a privileged member of the company, and enjoyed advantages which are not often at the command of young people who play subsidiary parts in a travelling company. Wherever it was possible to make such an arrangement

she had a dressing-room to herself, and the faithful Mrs. Jordan acted as her maid. That not too rigid dragon was absent when Lord Limesborough strolled behind the scenes. He drank a brandy and soda with Mr. Wilstrop with his customary affability, and returning into the dressing-room of the leading lady, had the door shut in his face with a shriek and cackle of simulated indignation.

He pursued his investigations undisturbed, and at the next open door marched in, to find Fléance in boy costume, looking very dainty and graceful and *petite*. Esther's back was turned to the intruder, and in her left hand she held an oval ivory-backed mirror, by the aid of which she was arranging her hair and the feathered cap which sat jauntily on its coil of reddish copper colour.

She heard the footstep behind her, but the first intimation of the sex of the new-comer was conveyed to her by the aromatic scent of the cigar his lordship sucked.

It might have been Mr. Wilstrop, for he occasionally defied rules in that way, and she did not trouble to turn and verify the fancy. But by-and-by something brushed her hair, and she saw in the glass she held the heavy handsome features of the Marquis of Limesborough, who was leaning over her shoulder with a smile somewhat satyr-like, and whose face was almost touching her own.

She met the reflection of his eyes with an insolence of scornful self-possession which at least matched the impudence of his approach; but the noble marquis was not easily to be daunted. He put his arm about her waist and hugged her

suddenly. At that the girl turned in a passion of rage, and dealt him a back-handed blow with the mirror which sent his hat flying through the open door.

She struck so shrewdly that the glass was broken from its frame and fell with a crash upon the floor, and then she stood with quivering nostrils and dilated gaze staring at this titled impertinent man as if she could willingly have made an end of him. The marquis put his lavender-gloved hand to the side of his face twice or thrice, and looked at it as if he doubted the result of the blow. He was a trifle rueful for a second or two, but showed no signs of anger. His red face began to twitch, and his eyes to twinkle, and at last he burst into a great shout of laughter.

"By gad," he said, "you *are* a tartar!"

"Leave my room, sir," said Esther.

"Hoity-toity!" said his lordship, in response.

She stamped her little foot, cased in its satin page's shoe, and waved him to the door with an indignation so vivid that, to his own great surprise when he found time to think about it, he left the room, and heard a second door slammed in his face.

"That's a clinking pretty little woman," he said to himself, rubbing at the ear with which the ivory back of the glass had come into contact. "I must have another look at her."

CHAPTER XX.

THE brilliant and continued success of "The Little Widow" made quite a personage of Jing; and the little woman could, if she had been so pleased, have spent her life in a complete round of gaieties.

Her success in the part had been instantaneous and complete, and in that fact there was nothing to excite surprise. She was barely two and twenty years of age, but she had had nineteen years' experience of the boards. She had been wheeled upon the scene in a baby carriage, and had sung a baby song in the annual pantomime which was

produced at about the date of her third birthday.

Since then she had played everything which could possibly be supposed to be within the scope of child, or girl, or woman. She had played in farce, pantomime, extravaganza, burlesque, tragedy, comedy. She had played Juliet and Romeo, Aladdin and Lady Macbeth. She had been the Osric to many Hamlets, had played Nan in "Good for Nothing," and Sam Willoughby in "The Ticket of Leave Man".

This was the education which, in days now vanished, made a stage artist. She danced well enough to make a capital columbine, she sang well enough to be more than commonly reliable as a singing chambermaid, she played the great traditional female parts in the good old tradi-

tional style, modernised a little by her own delicacy and observation. But the whole bent of her talent lay natively in the direction of comedy; and there her pretty face and charming presence, in combination with her perfect familiarity with the boards, made her almost invaluable.

Glynne, who in his unsuccessful days had been known as a rather hard-fisted man of business, blossomed unexpectedly into generosity when fortune reached him, and Jing drew a salary such as she had never dreamed of. It was moderate enough, as salaries go to-day, but it multiplied by five or six the figure which had represented the financial income of the family.

Papa Broom, who had earned the right to take his ease with dignity in these late hours of life, went dressed in lustrous broadcloth, joined

a theatrical club—where he established himself as a prime favourite—and, not to be altogether idle and dependent, made more or less of a show of training pupils for the stage.

Mamma Broom sank quite contentedly from her provincial eminence of first old woman into the position of her daughter's housekeeper, and made the modest establishment in Keppel Street as neat as a new pin from garret to basement. This establishment, modest as it was, was too big for the family needs; and Mrs. Broom had lodgers in the upper floors, two elderly professional gentlemen, who were orderly in their habits and gave her no trouble in the way of moral supervision.

There was no trudging now to rehearsal half a dozen times a week; and the well-saved black

silk, hitherto reserved for Sundays, became common to the week-day afternoons; and the old lady had such a wonderful stateliness of affability with the one small London slavy she employed that that young person reverenced her as if she had been a duchess.

"Unless my memory deceives me, Anna Maria, I instructed you to remove those potato peelings half an hour ago."

A warning like this, delivered in the tone which life-long habit had made natural to her, sank into the slavy's soul, and she was ready to fly at any moment to do the old lady's bidding. To Mrs. Broom the whole surroundings were elysian. She was off the boards, but she never ceased to act. In the little house in Keppel Street she was the dowager ruler of a lordly hall;

and her sway, though mild and gentle, was magnificent.

No cup of human happiness, however fortunately concocted, escapes the little drop. There was one thing which kept the whole household from being completely happy, and that one thing was the settled gloom which Mark carried with him everywhere.

They were an honest and affectionate household; and the old people had grown, long ago, to look on Mark as if he were a favourite son. They had believed in his talent from the time when he had first become their lodger, and in one or two times of trial they had had ample reason to believe in his goodness. Now, they enjoyed the first fruits of his success. Jing's splendid advancement and the ease and comfort of their own old age were due to

Mark, and they gave him love and worship in as full proportion as if he had actually been of their own flesh and blood. He looked in on them now and again, and sat at their plain but plenteous and tasteful table. He walked about a good deal with old Broom, and gave no sign of underrating them in the midst of his own prosperity. But he was no longer the merry lad of old. The jolly laugh was silent, and the light smile had vanished. Not so long ago he could hardly make a journey through the streets without picking up something provocative of mirth; but his quips and cranks were over. He walked about with a sore heart and indifferent eyes, caring for nothing. Not even the astonishing fact—which had, as students of the modern British drama know, only the rarest precedent—the fact that a French dramatist of dis-

tinction had bought the right to translate his comedy and produce it in Paris, awoke him from his apathy.

His American rights found an excellent market, —Glynne, who had a share in the profits, saw to that—a travelling company was sending in considerable fees from the provinces, and Glynne paid him a weekly cheque as his royalty at the Sheridan which would have been satisfactory as a half-year's wages half a year ago. But he cared for none of these things. He roamed about, idle and listless, neglecting the two or three dramatic commissions offered to him; and casual people who met the author of the brilliant little comedy wondered where the silent, mournful youngster had found his stores of fun.

Jing suffered from all this more than anybody;

but she bore up in her own quiet fashion, and continued to wear an air of placid cheerfulness deceptive to all eyes but her mother's. Sometimes her look would dwell on Mark's face as he sat silent at the luncheon table, trifling, with no appetite, with the meal before him, and whilst she watched him her mother would watch her in turn, reading the truth which Jing would have died rather than reveal. There was no denying the fact that Jing was pale, that her cheeks had lost the roundness of their outline, or that her eyes looked larger and brighter than they should have done. She was fretting inwardly,—and fretting, as Mrs. Broom knew only too well, for Mark's sake.

It happened one night that Mark called at the house in Keppel Street when Jing was at the theatre. He wore the manner which had grown usual to him,

and after drumming absently on the table for a quarter of an hour, and answering "Yes" and "No" at half random to whatever was said to him, rose to leave.

"You're not in any hurry, Mark?" the old lady asked him.

"I don't know that I am," Mark answered, with a sort of tired irresolution.

"You'd better go out for a bit of a walk, Broom," said the old lady, addressing her husband. "I want to have Mark to myself for a bit."

The old gentleman looked a mild surprise at this, but went out without a murmur. A little later they heard him close the door; and Mark, who resumed his seat, waited with no particular interest for what was coming.

"I hope and believe, Mark," the good motherly soul began, with an anxious and hesitating manner,

"that there's no need to tell you that you're very kindly welcome to our house."

"Well, no," said Mark, "I hope not." The unexpected opening startled him a little. "I'm sure I've never seen any reason to doubt my welcome. I hope you don't think I ever did doubt it."

"I hope you never will, Mark," said the old lady, "though I've got to say something which perhaps might make you think it. But you must never dream it, Mark. We're not ungrateful, and we know very well that we owe you everything."

"Oh, as to that," cried Mark, roused to protest—but Mrs. Broom took his hand in hers affectionately and cut him short at once.

"We all know that and feel it, Mark, and it makes what I have got to say to you all the harder. I want you not to come here quite so often."

He was indeed startled at this, and looked at her with a shocked surprise.

"I knew I should hurt you," she went on, "and I knew you'd wonder. I don't like to say it, but I suppose I'd better be quite plain with you. I'm an old woman, and that gives me a sort of right to speak. I'm sure, Mark, I don't believe there's a better young man in the world, and I'm sure I couldn't be prouder of you or fonder of you if you belonged to me."

"I'll do anything you want me to do, of course," Mark answered rather disconsolately; "but I confess I should like to know your reason."

"It's for Jing's sake, Mark," said the old lady, taking out her handkerchief and mopping her eyes.

"For Jing's sake!" Mark echoed, with a wondering, half-incredulous look at her.

"Jing's the best girl in the world," said Mrs. Broom, "and she'd cry her eyes out for very shame if she thought I'd ever spoken such a word to you. But I know how your fancy's gone, Mark, and I'm very sorry for it; because I don't think Esther is the sort of girl to make a good man happy."

"Don't say any more about that, please," said Mark rather coldly and sternly.

"I won't, dear," cried the old woman, "not a word. But you understand me now, Mark, don't you?"

"No," said Mark, with perfect truth. "I don't, indeed."

"Not about Jing, Mark? I'm afraid you're very blind. Jing thinks of you too much, Mark, for her own peace of mind. She doesn't guess I

know it, but I found it out a long time ago. I found it out as much as two years back, but I always made believe to know nothing; and to this hour she never guesses. I took no notice, because if you'd taken a fancy to her, as I used to think you might do, I could have died happy to see you two together; but now I know that that can never be, and I should be glad if you would help me to let poor Jing's fancy wear itself out. She's a good girl, Mark, and it breaks my heart to think that she should have thrown her own away on a good man who can never be anything to her but a friend. You're not angry with me, Mark?"

"Angry!" said Mark, and nothing more.

Mrs. Broom's tears were flowing freely by this time; but except that he smoothed with an

affectionate touch the soft and withered old hand he held within his own, he did nothing to help her to restrain them.

"You'll stop away for a little while, won't you, Mark?" the old lady besought him.

"Yes," said Mark, "if you wish it."

His whole mind was in a whirl. The intelligence came upon him with so swift a surprise that he had hardly yet had time to realise its meaning.

"I'll find a way," said Mrs. Broom, "to let her know you care for Esther."

"Don't do that, if you please," said the young man almost harshly. "I care no more for Esther than you do. I wish her well, but I have no special interest in her."

"Mark!" cried the old lady, withdrawing her

hand from his in the excess of her amazement. "You can't mean that?"

"I mean it," Mark returned; "I mean it absolutely."

"But I'd have sworn," said Mrs. Broom, "that you were grieving yourself and wearing yourself into a shadow because she made such a failure in your piece."

"No," said Mark. "I never looked for anything but failure. I am Esther's friend, and nothing more. If I can ever be of use to her, I will be, very gladly, but she is as little to me as any girl in all the world."

He thought it true enough as he spoke it, though his heart was bleeding even yet from the wound her ungrateful hand had given it.

"Good-night," he added softly. "You shall

have your way, and if you see less of me than you used to, you'll understand."

"You'll never say a word, Mark? But there, I needn't talk about that. I know you too well to want to speak to you about it."

She took him in her arms and kissed him. Mark kissed her gently back again and went his way.

The more he thought about it—and he thought of little else for many nights and days—the more he was persuaded that Jing's pure and innocent fancy had strayed his way. A man need not be a coxcomb to believe as he did upon such evidence; and yet he felt a taint of coxcombry, and a constant inward reproach against what seemed an absurd vanity as belief grew more and more upon him. He had never believed himself to have known a better girl than Jing. He had known her now for

years, and had always known her modest, gentle, untiringly helpful for others, and unceasingly forgetful of herself. Because he himself was a pure-minded and clean-living young fellow, and had lived half buried amongst old books, and lost to the world for the most part in the dusty glamour of his own dreams, he felt as if he were guilty of a sacrilegious invasion in entering, even for a moment, on the privacy of Jing's maiden fancies. And yet he dwelt there not altogether reluctantly, for hours and hours, and days and days. He was not of so poor and unstable a nature that he could change his mind at once; but if he had asked himself in cold blood at any minute within the last five years, to judge between the sterling womanly qualities of Jing and the altogether selfish, childish charm of Esther, he would have been compelled to see which side of the

balance kicked the beam. As a matter of fact, he knew, and always had known, that no comparison was possible between them ; but, unhappily, feeling is not always amenable to reason, and of all the passions love is the one which most reluctantly seeks reason's aid. The mother's revelation, however, paved the way for him. A slow and unconscious revulsion of feeling set in in the young man's mind, and the thought of Jing always before him brought him nearer and nearer to her. Little by little, his peace of mind came back to him ; and a chance meeting with a manager, who had months ago entrusted him with a commission which he had so far left untouched, gave a fillip to ambition. He went back to work again, and being a young man who had no power to do anything by halves, he threw himself body and soul into his work ; and so,

by that best and safest of all routes, climbed back to the full possession of himself.

He went abroad but little at this time, but occasionally of an evening strolled into the theatre, watched a scene of the play, and smoked a cigar between the acts with Glynne and Francis in the manager's room. The piece looked as if it might run for ever, for on its two-hundredth night there was a bumper house; and Mark, strolling in forgetful of the occasion, found himself perforce content with standing room at the back of the dress circle. He lingered there for a minute or two only, and was moving away when the round of applause which greeted Jing's entrance stayed him for a little, and he turned again to watch the business of the stage. Almost from the first he thought her manner forced and odd. Her voice rang false,

and even under her stage make-up her face looked haggard. Her eyes had a strained and unnatural expression, and the spontaneous gentle gaiety which had always until now distinguished her performance had vanished utterly. In the full tide of a bright speech she paused and sank into a garden seat, but recovering herself instantly went on as if that had been a part of the everyday business of the scene. Mark knew otherwise, and ran brimful of anxiety to the stage door, where he passed at once to Glynne's room. The actor-manager was on the stage, and Mark awaited him nervously for five minutes. He came at last, looking worried and ill at ease, and at the first moment of his entry he did not see his visitor, who heard him breathe a soft anathema to himself.

"Confound it! Well, it's my luck."

"What's the matter, Glynne?" Mark asked. "What's the matter with Miss Broom? I was in front five minutes back, and I thought she was going to faint on the stage. There's something very queer about her."

"Queer!" responded Glynne. "I believe the poor girl's dying." Mark was too horrified to speak. "She's been going from bad to worse for weeks past. Got a chill a month ago—thin boots, wet streets—would go on working. After all there's no great harm in that. No better medicine in the world for an old hand than the footlights. But she's overdone it, and her under-study—you might as well ask a horse to play the part. There isn't a woman in London who can hold a candle to Miss Broom as the Widow. Here we are making money hand over fist, the biggest success of the last

five years, and if she goes the whole show's burst up."

"But is she really seriously ill?" asked Mark.

"My dear man," cried Glynne, with a brutal plainness, "the girl's dying. The doctor's with her now. She can't get on from scene to scene without restoratives. And what the devil we shall do without her I do *not* know."

Mark was not thinking of the play at all. That for the moment was a matter of the most complete indifference to him.

"Can I see her?" he asked. "Can I be of any use to her in any way?"

"Better not disturb her," Glynne responded. "She's in good hands, but I don't know that she'll ever be able to get through the night. The other girl's dressed and ready to go on. I may

have to explain and apologise between the acts. I've been expecting that any night this week past."

This was sad news for Mark, and would have been at any hour for years past. But now it came with triple force, for since his last interview with Mrs. Broom nobody, excepting Esther, had been in his thoughts so often as Jing. He had always had a warm affection for her, and a complete esteem, and it was terrible to think of the shattered lives of the old people if anything should happen to their idol and the sole prop of the house. Mark had time, in all the whirling hurry of his mind, to think that so long as he was above ground his friends should know no material want; but in a flash of that vivid fancy which only the trained imaginative intelligence often knows, he

saw the house empty of its one delight and joy, and the old people sitting mute and broken by a cheerless hearth.

"I hope you're exaggerating the gravity of the case, Glynne," he said, feeling as if he were under compulsion to say something.

"I wish I could think so," Glynne answered, "for our own sakes."

"I'm not thinking about our own sakes," Mark answered bitterly.

The business man's apparent selfishness shocked and hurt him.

"I'm thinking of the poor girl herself, and of her father and mother. They're the oldest friends I have in the world, and if your news is true there's nothing less than heartbreak in front of them."

"They're a good old couple," Glynne answered.

"The old woman's here every night. I'm afraid this is the end of it. Anyway, the poor girl will be worse before she's better, and that's the best that can be said for her. Have some whisky and soda, old chap. I'm so depressed and worried that, upon my word, I can't get through my work without it."

Mark shook his head in refusal, and at that instant a knock sounded at the door.

"Come in!" cried the manager, and Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop entered hastily. He paused for a moment, embarrassed at the sight of the declared enemy who had expressed himself so openly at their last interview, but recovered his self-possession almost instantly.

"I'm sorry, dear boy," he said, addressing Glynne with an exaggerated air and a voice of sympathy.

"I am heartily sorry, but I have bad news for you. Miss Broom can't go on again. You'll have to apologise to the house."

"Oh," said Glynne curtly, "how do you know that?"

"I was in front, dear boy," returned Mr. Wilstrop, "and I saw that there was something wrong with the poor creature. I could tell, dear boy, that for one reason or another she was not herself. I came round to make inquiries, and I met the doctor. He seized on the chance of my presence, and asked me to bring you the news."

"All right," said Glynne, with an air of desperate resignation. He drank at a gulp the whisky and soda he had poured out for himself, and after a turn or two up and down the room, went out.

The orchestra was in full swing, but the

manager did not wait for the conclusion of the number on which it was engaged. With a mere wave of the hand he ordered the edge of the curtain to be withdrawn, and walked on to the stage.

The music stopped at a single gesture from his hand, and the strange finish brought throngs of curious faces to the doors which led from the corridor to the circle. In a few words he announced the serious indisposition of Miss Broom, that charming actress who had been the life and soul of the piece for a hundred and ninety-nine nights, who had struggled for weeks past to do her duty to the public, in spite of the warnings of her friends and her medical adviser. She had now broken down completely, but Miss Venner was prepared to take her place, and with the kind indulgence of

the house would assume Miss Broom's part in the second and third acts. This announcement was sympathetically received ; and Glynne walked back to his own room again, where he flung himself gloomily into a chair, and stared at the tips of his patent leather toes.

"Don't be down-hearted, dear boy," said Wilstrop, laying a fat hand upon his shoulder. "It's the luckiest thing I ever knew of, that I'm in town at this moment. I can find you the best Little Widow in London. She can walk on to the stage to-morrow night, for she is letter perfect, and she'll knock 'em as high as a kite."

"Who is she?" Glynne asked.

"She is the young lady, my dear boy," Wilstrop responded, "who failed in this house in that part eight months ago."

"Oh, go to Putney!" cried Glynne disgustedly. "I've had enough of that young woman. She can no more play the part than she can fly."

"Excuse me, dear boy," broke in Wilstrop. "Am I generally supposed to know my business or am I not? Do you see any green in this, Bertie?" He indicated his left eye with a playful forefinger, and shook his head with a smiling self-contentment. "That young woman has been put through the mill this last half-year, and has been put through the mill by *me*. I gave her her head last week. She played Lady Teazle in Liverpool, and you never saw a house so knocked in all your life. Look here, dear boy. I came round here expecting business. I've looked in for a night or two past, and I've got my proposal ready for you. Cast your eye over that." He drew a blue foolscap

document from his breast pocket, and Glynne took it from his hand and looked at it.

"A three years' engagement, you observe," said Wilstrop. "Ten pounds a week first year, work or play, twenty the second, and thirty the third. Did you ever know me chuck away money like that on a duffer? No, dear boy. You never have and never will."

"She must have improved since I saw her," said Glynne, negligently handing back the paper, "and she must have improved a lot, if she's worth a tenth part of the money."

"Improved!" cried Wilstrop, beaming all over. "You'll think so when you see her. Now, business, dear boy, business. You can have her for ten pounds a week for six weeks. I don't want, dear boy," he added significantly, "to make a penny

out of you. I only want a London chance for the prettiest and cleverest little woman on the boards. She's no more like what she was than the moon is like green cheese."

"Bring her to rehearsal to-morrow," said Glynne.

Mark stole out unheard, and paced the Strand by himself, unwitting of the glare and bustle about him. His feet led him mechanically past Temple Bar, and he had walked the whole length of Fleet Street before he became aware of his own whereabouts.

Then he turned his face towards Keppel Street, and walking briskly, with a strange fear at his heart, reached the well-known door, and having stood before it undecided for a while, approached and knocked softly. Old Broom answered the summons.

"Come in, lad, come in," he whispered, with a backward nod of invitation. "Poor Jing's upstairs. They brought her home in a cab ten minutes since. The doctor's with her, and I'm waiting for his news. I'm afraid she's going to have a bad time of it."

"I hope not," said Mark, taking his nerveless hand. "I hope not."

They entered the sitting-room together, and sat down in silence to await the doctor's coming.

CHAPTER XXI.

SUCH a buzzing of talk had arisen about that unhappy event of the Five-year-old Club that his grace of Belisle had withdrawn himself from England. The fact that he had been altogether blameless in the matter—the fact, indeed, that he had behaved rather more like a man and a gentleman than he was wont to do—made that fashionable and all-absorbing topic none the more agreeable for him. He had travelled from one winter resort to another; and now, with the return of warmer weather, was in Paris. The fact of that gay city having finished its season before his arrival made

little difference to him. His most prized acquaintanceship lay amongst men of letters, artists, actors and actresses; and these were to be enjoyed, more or less, all the year round.

The Marquis of Limesborough was less sensitive than his father, and was back in London after only a month or two of exile. A very curious thing had happened to his lordship. For the first time in his life he had fallen honestly in love; and the object of his attachment was the daringly virtuous young lady who had broken a hand mirror over his head. The more he thought about that scene with Esther, the more he liked the part she had taken in it. It is no part of our business to inquire too curiously into the history of his lordship's fancies and amours. He had not seen much of the society of virtuous women. He shunned the respectable members of

the fair sex as instinctively as he himself would have been avoided by them if he had chosen to be seen much amongst them. He thought of himself as of one who had lived a life of conquest; though the plain truth of that matter was that he had only spent his days in walking out of one vulgar flaring trap into another. He could, of course, have found millions of women who would have resisted his clumsy blandishments if he had known where to look for them; but he had never, until now, stumbled upon anybody to whom the glamour of his wealth and title made no appeal.

And Miss Delacour, having been grossly insulted, and having reproved the insulter so vigorously, was not in the mood to change her mind or her manners easily. His lordship did his best in his own way to bring her to reason

and to friendship. He sent her one or two costly trifles in the way of jewellery, which were indignantly returned to him. During the whole of Esther's stay in the country town he occupied a box at the theatre every night, and found the legitimate drama a sufficiently weary business even when brightened by the presence of an astonishingly pretty unaccountable young woman who was indifferent to diamonds.

The company moved away to a town thirty miles distant, and, lo! on the first night his lordship was there. He took his box for the week anonymously, and sat alone in it in shadow, glowering sulkily at the stage, except when Esther was engaged, when he brightened into interest. He sent anonymous presents, which were not returned. Miss Delacour knew per-

fectly well from whom they came, but there was no need for her to show as much, and she was beginning to have a taste in respect to that sort of delightful gewgaw.

Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop, who kept as keen an eye upon his own business as any man alive, was aware of what was going on about him. It was his lordship's obvious desire not to be recognised just now, and Mr. Wilstrop took care to oblige him in that particular.

Lord Limesborough found things growing extremely dull. He had packed his intimates back to town, and was without society. He lost a good deal of his faculty for drinking under these unwonted conditions, for, strangely enough, he had little native bent that way. Amongst his own set he was not commonly quite sober;

but then all the men about him drank, and he joined, more than half for the sake of companionship.

It had been a habit of his to go to bed nightly in a state of intoxication, but in constitution he was as sound as a roach, and he had the strength of an ox. No physically wholesome man drinks by himself to habitual excess; and the poor marquis, missing his customary ways, grew very hipped indeed. He was by no means enlightened as to the road on which he was travelling; and if anybody had told him that he was really and seriously falling in love, he would have laughed the idea to scorn. The scorn would have been in no wise excited by any contemplation of the difference between Esther's social position and his own, for he was no respecter of persons.

But he did honestly believe at first that he hated the little baggage, and that he had no other intention than to break her pride. He admired her pluck, to be sure, and he bore not a shadow of malice for the blow she had dealt him. That was quite within the limits of the lady's privilege. But her refusal of the jewelled olive branch he offered humiliated and stung him, and he had a furtive satisfaction in her retention of his anonymous presents, as though he enjoyed a triumph over her of which she was ignorant.

More than once he made an effort to get away from her. Twice in the course of that week he went home by train, but on each occasion night-fall saw him back again, and he was once more at the theatre in time for the rising of the curtain.

"Macbeth," and "Hamlet," and "Othello," and

"Coriolanus," "The School for Scandal," and "She Stoops to Conquer" made up the weekly repertoire; and one and all bored him unutterably. They were all right, of course, "deuced clever and all that sort of thing," but not his style. He sat them out with a dreary valour, and bits of some of them came home to him. "Who would fardels bear, to grunt and sweat under a weary life?" He did not know what "fardels" were, but the inquiry touched him nearly. At Cassio's heart-wounded exclamation, "Oh, that men should put an enemy into their mouth to steal away their brains!" his lordship in his lonely box nodded to himself with emphasis.

"Lots of dem 'cute things in Shakespeare," he said to himself; "knew his way about, that johnny."

But this life of isolation, tempered by no matter what extent of philosophic reflection, grew unbearable. The marquis threw himself in the way of Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop, and invited that gentleman to his hotel. He called for champagne, which was his best way of exhibiting hospitality. Mr. Wilstrop's day's work was over; his lordship naturally had the best suite of rooms in the hotel, and after labour, rest and relaxation were pleasant. It was pleasant, too, to be the sole guest of the Marquis of Limesborough, in a house where both were known; and altogether the manager was inclined to be in high spirits. He knew his host's taste in narrative, and had whole bundles of stories of a type distinctly Rabelaisian. He was a master of the art of narrative, and had grown perfect with practice in every tale he told. He was a magnificent mimic, and

made every yarn he told live to the ear and eye. The marquis ordered more champagne, and more; and when Mr. Wilstrop rose with a pretended desire to leave, he took him forcibly by the shoulders and reseated him with a boisterous hospitality. When the third bottle was coming to a finish the marquis began to be serious, and an itch for talking came upon him which was not to be resisted. He was compounded of indiscretion, and could no more be trusted with a secret than a child. So he began to talk about Miss Delacour; and Mr. Wilstrop was not long in discovering that the foolish nobleman was very near being in love with that young lady.

"Little beggar's got grit," said his lordship, after relating the story of the dressing-room. "She's got muscle, too, begad. She landed me on the

side of the head as if she was chopping wood. I admire her for it."

"Oh!" said Wilstrop, with the smile of a man of the world—a stage man of the world. "I've not the slightest doubt that the little woman knows how to take care of herself."

"Now, you know, you know," said his lordship, with a touch of anxiety discernible alike in face and voice. "She's a straight girl, isn't she? There's no humbug about her. She didn't go for me that way just because I was a little bit too previous, did she?"

"My dear boy," said Mr. Wilstrop, who knew better than to call a nobleman "my lord" too often; "if Providence had blessed me with a daughter I would not ask that she should be a more perfect model of discretion and modesty than Miss Dela-

cour. She is a credit to her sex and her profession."

"I thought so," said his lordship. "Begad, I was sure of it; I wanted to make it up to her, you know. I meant the little beggar no harm, but it's my way, don't you know, Wilstrop. It's always been 'Take me or leave me' with me; and to tell the truth, I've pretty generally found 'em ready to come half-way. I sent her a little thing or two—things in the jewellery way, you know—just to see if she wouldn't make friends, and begad she sent 'em back to me before she'd had time to do more than open 'em and look at 'em. Now, Wilstrop, I admire the little girl for that. Upon my word, I do. Don't you, now?"

"As I said before," responded Mr. Wilstrop, "the little lady is a model of virtue and discretion."

"I believe she is now," said the marquis. "Upon my soul I do. But I've had the best of her, Wilstrop. I've sent her two or three things, 'From an admirer'. D'ye see? Blank paper. No address on it. Straight from the jeweller's. She didn't know where to send 'em back to. She's had to stick to those."

He said this with an air of so much triumph and cunning that Mr. Wilstrop instantly obliged him with the laugh his manner asked for.

"I'm having a little thing made," pursued the marquis, "a little thing in diamonds, in the shape of the letter L. It's a brooch, you know—the kind of thing they fasten up a bit of lace with. I'm going to send that to her in the same way, and it may just give her a bit of a tip as to where the others came from. She can't send

them back, after having stuck to 'em, and she'll have to keep that as well, don't you see? Don't you think that's the way to fix it, Wilstrop? I should like to be friends with the little thing. She's a cut above the sort of women you often meet, you know, and I've got a sort of respect for her. I think she's straight, Wilstrop; and really, you know, there's a lot in that when you come to think of it. She sets a proper value on herself."

"'Good name in man or woman, good my lord,'" Mr. Wilstrop answered, "'is the immediate jewel of the soul.'" He was charmed at first with the double felicity of this quotation, but recalling suddenly to mind the repute in which Lord Limesborough was generally held, he was inwardly convicted of a terrible

impertinence, and blew his nose to cover his confusion.

"Begad, you're right," said the marquis. "And you put it devilish well into the bargain. You don't think she'll be offended, do you, Wilstrop? I want to be friends, you know. I don't set up to be a Joseph, and that sort of thing; but, hang it all, I never did insult a decent woman. A man's a cad who does that, Wilstrop."

The manager had more and more food for reflection. He had had the honour of his lordship's acquaintance for some years, and had never until that evening seen him flying the colours under which he now chose to sail. There was something in this which might possibly tend to his own personal advantage. He was swift to see where the main chance lay,

and keen to pursue it. He thought he saw it here.

"I haven't the slightest doubt," he said, "that if I had your lordship's permission to meddle in the matter, I could explain the whole thing to Miss Delacour satisfactorily in a moment."

"Of course you could," cried the marquis eagerly. "I wish you would, old chap. I should be awfully obliged to you."

"You may rely on that matter, dear boy, as being settled."

With that Mr. Wilstrop arose, and resisting all further pressure, went his way to his own apartments, which were situated half-way between the theatre and the hotel. He thought things over as he walked, and as he undressed for bed. The Marquis of Limesborough had barely uttered

a single oath whilst he had spoken about Esther. He had not drunk to excess as he commonly did. A mere bottle and a half of champagne made short commons for a gentleman of his lordship's habits. He had spoken of the girl not only in words of approval but with a manner which indicated more than he was able, or chose to say. Mr. Wilstrop laid his head upon the pillow with a conviction that Miss Delacour was born to find in him a guide, philosopher, and friend. The further conviction that he, Bonnington Wilstrop, might make something solid and substantial out of the business lent an agreeable colour to his latest waking thoughts.

Early in the morning he despatched a message to Esther, who, in answer to his call, appeared at midday.

"Sit down, my dear," said Mr. Wilstrop, with his most fatherly benevolence of manner. "You are looking very fresh and bright and pretty to-day."

"I suppose that isn't what you wanted to say to me," said Esther pertly.

"Not all I wanted to say," the manager responded; "but I can assure you I don't often see you without thinking it. I want to talk to you quite seriously, my child. I spent an hour or two last night with Lord Limesborough."

"Oh," said Esther, raising her hands, "don't speak to me about that man! He's a brute!"

"I am desired by Lord Limesborough," continued Mr. Wilstrop, "to say that he is profoundly sorry to have incurred your displeasure. He admits that you treated him quite rightly

and he admires you very much for the way in which you met an advance which he now admits to have been impertinent."

"Thank him for nothing," cried Miss Delacour. "I hope you didn't send for me to tell me that."

"That is a part of what I wanted to tell you," said the manager, "but there is something more."

"If it's about him," Esther retorted, "you needn't trouble yourself to tell it."

"Excuse me, my dear child," said Wilstrop, "you must listen to what I have to say. The Marquis of Limesborough is, as you know, the son of the Duke of Belisle. The old gentleman has already reached a venerable age. It is evident to the most casual observer that his grace is approaching the allotted limit of his span

of life. In a year or two, at the outside, the Marquis of Limesborough will be the Duke of Belisle. He will hold one of the proudest titles and one of the greatest fortunes in the world."

"I know all about that," said Esther. "But what has it got to do with me? The man's a beast—and I hate him."

"The marquis," continued Mr. Wilstrop, unheeding this outburst, which was offered with unusual vehemence,—"the Marquis of Limesborough has many qualities of the better sort which you have not so far found time or opportunity to investigate."

"Bother!" said Esther. "Rubbish! Everybody knows him; great big hulking groom!"

"His wife," said Mr. Wilstrop, leaning forward impressively and laying both hands firmly on the

table before him, "his wife will be Duchess of Belisle." Esther made no response to this at all, but sat staring at him in a sort of stupor. "I repeat, my dear," said Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop, "Lord Limesborough's wife will, in the common course of events, become the Duchess of Belisle. She will rank with the highest ladies in the land, and she will be rich beyond the dreams of avarice."

Esther's colour changed; and Mr. Wilstrop, attentively regarding her, noticed a little shudder which seemed to pass all over her.

"Is his lordship going to get married?" she asked, with a considerable effort.

The manager smiled and waved both his fat white hands in the air, and sank back comfortably into his seat.

"Not immediately, I fancy, but——" He paused

and smiled again, unctuously and with a deep enjoyment. Esther went paler yet, and her large eyes grew and grew as she fixed her gaze upon him.

"What do you mean?" she asked. She spoke in a harsh whisper.

"I mean," said Mr. Wilstrop, "that I know a young lady who, if she played her cards properly, and under competent direction—understand me clearly, my dear child—properly, and under competent direction—might have a chance of occupying the exalted position whose advantages I have so feebly indicated. Think of that, my dear, and think about it more than once or twice."

"Did Lord Limesborough say anything?" Esther made shift to ask. "Anything to you last night?"

"Lord Limesborough said much to me last night," returned Mr. Wilstrop, "but nothing which could in

the slightest degree bind or implicate himself. I don't say that, even if you played your cards with the most perfect discretion, what I have shadowed forth would be certain to come to pass; but I think, my dear, that I might be of service to you, and I am perfectly willing to try. I think, my dear, that you had better have a glass of wine."

She looked as if she needed it, for her very lips were bloodless, and the look in her eyes was almost one of horror. He poured out a glass of sherry, and she drank it at once. Her colour came slowly back again, and she sat in silence, drawing off one of her gloves and plucking absently at its fingers.

"You needn't try to make a fool of me, Wilstrop," she said after a long silence. "Either you've got some right to talk to me like this, or you haven't. Which is it?"

"I tell you, my dear child," said Mr. Wilstrop weightily, "that I believe it can be done. I believe we can do it together, and I am willing to give you all the help I can. Think it over."

CHAPTER XXII.

MR. BONNINGTON WILSTROP'S injunction to Esther to think it over was perhaps as completely unnecessary a piece of advice as was ever offered in the history of the world. She went away almost stunned by the astonishing intimation which the manager had conveyed to her mind, and when her wits really began to act again she could think of nothing else. The idea was with her all day long, and mingled in her dreams at night. She knew very little about duchesses; but Mrs. Jordan had given her a list of the Duke of Belisle's castles and country seats, and she had seen in print a

pictorially illustrated description of one of them, which had filled her mind with wonder. Then, during her brief stay in London, she had been with her companion to see the fine ladies alighting from their carriages at a royal reception; and the trains, and the feathers, and the diamonds, and the big liveried servants who waited on the owners of these things, had driven her wild with envy. To be one of that select body seemed the most glorious destiny in the world. To be able to queen it amongst them was to reach an almost incredible pinnacle of splendour. The thought staggered her, as the contemplation of the infinite oppresses the mind of the philosopher. It was past understanding—a splendour wonderful beyond all conception. And it is curious to remark, but very natural all the same, that the contempla-

tion of this high place in the possession of another person filled her with nothing more or less than a mingling of envy and impertinent disdain. Now that it began to look even dimly possible for herself, she would have regarded as a madman anybody who had advised her to abandon it for the certainty of heaven. Her mind underwent no change as to the Marquis of Limesborough's power to please her. She had aptly experienced her opinion of him at the beginning of her interview with Wilstrop. To her thinking, as to that of a great many other people, he remained an embodiment of vulgarity and ill breeding. With all her own shortcomings of character, she had a naturally fastidious taste, and though she had had but little opportunity of cultivating it, she had at least taken full advantage of all her chances. In this one

respect her life had been an upward progress from the hour when Mark had rescued her from the squalor and misery of her childish home. She despised Lord Limesborough very thoroughly; but, except as a possible stepping-stone to greatness, she left him unconsciously out of her calculations. It never entered her head to think what life would mean if she were bound irrevocably to a man of whom she entertained such opinions.

She and Wilstrop had more than one conference before the arrival of the gift which was meant to reveal her admirer's identity.

They had moved into another town by this time, and here again the infatuated marquis had a box at the theatre. Here again he sat out the week's repertoire from "Hamlet" to "She Stoops to Conquer,"

yawning carelessly through speech and action which had no interest for him, and brightening up only at Esther's brief appearances. He had already received from his London jeweller the initial brooch, and on the last night of the week he went down to the theatre, carrying his gift with him in its little morocco case.

That night a surprise was in store for him; for Miss Delacour appeared as Miss Hardcastle, and astonished and delighted him beyond measure. The young lady had been understudying all the leading female parts, and Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop had been instructing her and working with her with a devotion which would have been remarkable had it not bidden so fair to bring a rich reward. Perhaps Esther could nowhere have found a better tutor, and certainly Wilstrop would have had

difficulty in finding a pupil equally apt and quick.

Under his tuition she made extraordinary progress, and her performance that Saturday night delighted the audience and surprised the manager.

The marquis lost his head completely, and made himself conspicuous to the whole house. He leaned his red heavy face over the cushion of the box, and roared laughter and applause throughout the piece. He was so enthusiastic as to be something of a nuisance both to audience and performers, for he thought Miss Hardcastle's least important utterance worthy of a salvo.

At the end of the second act he went round to Mr. Wilstrop and congratulated him, with so noisy an effusion that the manager's heart danced

within him. It need hardly be said, perhaps, that he did not intend to go altogether unrewarded if he succeeded in bagging the marquis as an honourable suitor for Miss Delacour's hand. In point of fact, Mr. Wilstrop had made his arrangements already, and saw his way to an unusually good thing.

"Splendid, my boy!" said the marquis, patting Wilstrop on both shoulders. "Gaudy! Magnificent! Never saw anything like it."

"I have played the part often," said Mr. Wilstrop, beaming with a sense of his own humour; "but I have not often succeeded in giving so much pleasure as I seem to have afforded to you this evening."

"You!" shouted his lordship. "You, you thunderin' old pump! Who's talkin' about you?"

"Not about me?" said Mr. Wilstrop, with a comically resigned elevation of the eyebrows. "Who then?"

"Why, the little woman." His lordship, who in moments of excitement was stronger than he knew, dug Mr. Wilstrop in the waistcoat, and knocked all the breath out of the eminent actor's body. "Beats anything I ever saw. She's just stunning."

"Dear boy," said Wilstrop, with a rather ghastly assumption of gaiety, "in a year's time she'll be the best little actress in England. She's going to be worth twenty or thirty thousand pounds to me. I've got her for three years, and when this tour's over I'm going to give her a show in London."

"I say, Wilstrop," said his lordship, suddenly confidential, "I wish you'd do a little thing for me."

"Anything in my power, my lord," the manager responded effusively.

"I've got a trifle here," said the marquis, taking out a morocco case from his pocket; "little thing I told you about last week. She might like to have it. You can tell her it's from a friend. 'Respectful admirer,' and all that sort of thing."

"I'd rather you didn't ask me that, my lord," Wilstrop said, stiffening somewhat in his manner.

His lordship, though unused to it, actually blushed.

"Hang it all, Wilstrop, there's no harm in it. Upon my word, Wilstrop, there's no harm in it. Now look here, Wilstrop, I give you my sacred word of honour, as a gentleman, there isn't."

"My lord," returned Mr. Wilstrop, "I accept your declaration unreservedly. But I stand *in loco parentis* to an orphan. You would hardly ask the child's father to accept a gift of that kind in her name."

"Yes, but, begad, I would though!" cried the marquis.

"I am sorry I cannot be of service."

"But, hang it all, man! When I tell you there's no harm."

"Dear boy," said Mr. Wilstrop, unbending a little, "I am a business man. Let me put it in that way. I can't afford to have the child's head turned, and least of all can I afford to turn it."

"Well, there's something in that," said the marquis reluctantly. "Have you got anything

here that I can wrap it up in? I'll send it round by the boxkeeper."

The manager found a sheet of foolscap, in which Limesborough clumsily wrapped up the precious little case, and having tied up his misshapen parcel, went away, nodding and winking.

The manager was no sooner assured of his departure than he walked to Miss Delacour's dressing-room and rapped at the door. Mrs. Jordan put out her head, and an odour of gin and cloves floated on the air.

"One minute, Mr. Wilstrop," said the good lady, in her most dulcet tones. "You'll be ready in one minute, won't you, dearie?"

"You can come in now," said Esther's voice from within.

The manager entered, and would have dismissed

Mrs. Jordan, but the sacred rites of the toilet were still in practice.

"I have something to say to you when I can speak alone," said the manager. "Come to my room when you are ready."

"But I'm on almost directly," Esther pleaded.

"There's plenty of time for what I want to say," returned Wilstrop, and so left her. She supposed, of course, that he had news of the marquis, and was on fire to know what it might be. As soon as she could escape from Mrs. Jordan's hands, she ran.

"You'll have a packet in a minute or two," said Wilstrop curtly. "You'll find inside it a letter L, in diamonds. You'll send it back at once, and with it you'll send all the other things he's given you."

"Oh!" she cried, "there is no need for that."

"I told you at the beginning," said Wilstrop, "that you'd want a competent hand to play this game. If you'll let me play it for you, I'll play it; and if you won't, I won't."

"I shan't send back that diamond hairpin," said Esther.

"You'll send back the lot," Wilstrop declared, with stern emphasis. "You're not playing for a twopenny ha'penny stake here. Do as I tell you, and you'll be grateful to me. Be a silly, greedy little donkey now, and you'll miss such a chance as almost any woman in the world would give her ears for."

Esther stood for a minute or two flushing with rebellion under her stage make-up, and with tears gathering in her beautiful eyes. Mr. Wilstrop was not in the least touched by her beauty, her temper,

or her distress. It had been a large portion of the business of his life to deal with imperious beauty, which was pretty generally exacting, illogical, and ill-tempered; and had Juno herself been his leading lady he would have issued his orders to her as calmly as to an earthly carpenter.

"Do as you're told," he said. "I know what's best for you."

Esther was persuaded of that, but it went to her heart to give back the jewels. They seemed to have grown to be actually hers in the fortnight for which she had retained them, and she and Mrs. Jordan had made a hundred guesses at their value. But in spite of the hold the costly baubles had taken upon her she knew that Wilstrop was right, and made up her mind to follow his advice. She clicked her little teeth in a spasm of anger against

Lord Limesborough for submitting her to this tantalus anguish, and at the moment when she reached her dressing-room door she was encountered by the messenger who carried the marquis's ill-packed parcel in his hand.

"This has been left for you, miss."

"Wait there," said Esther, snatching the packet from him and dashing angrily into the room. She tore off the wrapper, opened the case, and looked at its contents with an eye of concupiscence and wrath.

"Oh, dearie!" cried Mrs. Jordan. "That is luck. You are in luck, to be sure! But then I always said you would be, from the first."

"That's from Lord Limesborough," said Esther. "How dare that man offer me anything?"

She was longing to accept it; but it was no part

of her business to let Mrs. Jordan into the secret of the little drama which was just then being played.

"You're not goin' to send it back again, are you, dearie?" cried Mrs. Jordan with clasped hands.

"Yes!" said Esther, "and everything else the brute has sent me! I know for certain where the others came from now."

Lord Limesborough's gifts lay in a little satchel which Esther always carried with her to and from the theatre, not caring to trust it to the keeping of any of her ever-varying landladies. The little satchel held all the duke's gifts likewise, and its contents were worth a good deal of money. Esther singled out the cases which held the marquis's gifts, and bundling them together with the latest rejected prize, wrapped them hastily in the torn sheet of

foolscap, tied them with the broken string, and handed them to the messenger without.

"Take them to Lord Limesborough's box, and give them into his own hands. Then come back to me."

The man went away, and Esther received her call to the stage. She sailed in just in time to avoid a wait; and almost the first object she caught sight of beyond the footlights was the ruddy, clean-shaven countenance of her admirer, frantically ready to cheer her. She saw him wave a backward hand as if waving off some intruder, and she even caught the deep bass murmur of his voice as he bade an invisible person go to the devil. Her scene was over, and she had left the stage a minute or two before the messenger returned.

"I've given the packet to his lordship, miss," said the man, rubbing the bridge of his nose with a hooked forefinger, and looking as if he had had a recent scare.

"Well," demanded Esther, "what did he say?"

"Well, I don't know," the man began, and then hesitated.

"You don't know!" Esther repeated scornfully. "Are you deaf?"

"No," the messenger answered, "I ain't deaf, miss; but as for what his lordship said—why, you can only thank your stars alive you didn't hear him."

"Tell me what he said," cried Esther, stamping her little foot imperiously.

"No, I shan't, miss," the messenger responded. "If you was a cart horse I might try to whistle

it to you, but I wouldn't repeat his lordship's language to a lady, not to own the Mint."

"Was he very angry?" she asked.

"You'd ha' thought he was, if you'd ha' seen him, miss. He reg'lar danced on them little boxes as you sent back to him, and what he said was enough to call down a judgment on the 'ouse."

Esther clapped her hands and crowed with sudden triumph. She was inexperienced enough, but she knew how to value that burst of rage and violence. The Marquis of Limesborough was in earnest. To the messenger's profound amazement she tipped him with a sovereign, and he went his way, knuckling his forehead as if from an abyss of thanks and wonder.

For his part the Marquis of Limesborough struggled into his overcoat and strode from the

theatre, choking and black with rage. He had stamped the four dainty jewel cases into fragments; and their beautiful contents, bent out of shape, were half embedded in the carpet. He left them behind, and shouldered along the corridor, down the stairs and through the lobby, like a bull making for a gate. One or two people were standing at the entrance to the house, smoking and talking, when he burst between them, shouldering them savagely to right and left. The shock was so unexpected, and he looked so mad with anger, and was so big and strong, that the men did nothing but stare after him in silence. He ploughed his way through the streets to his hotel, hustling a score of inoffensive people, and in one or two cases was pursued by execrations, which he either did not hear or disdained to notice. Arrived at his

own rooms, and finding his man absent, he tore off his coat, hurled it into one corner of the room, threw his hat into the firegrate, and kicked an ottoman from one side of the apartment to the other. Then he found breath and language, and gave his passion vent for full five minutes. This made him dry, and he rang for brandy and soda. When it came, he half filled the deep tumbler with neat spirit, and the waiter stared and hesitated before pouring in the soda water; and his lordship, remarking this, began to rage anew. The waiter went away trembling and aghast, and reported that he had never been so miscalled since he could remember anything.

Limesborough sat and drank fiercely for half an hour, vowing all the while that he would find a means to humble the girl who had so scornfully

received his advances. Then, finding in his own excited and bewildered thoughts no probability, or even possibility, of this, he settled into a savage quiet, filled his pipe, and sat down to smoke.

In a little while his mood began to change, and though fits and spurts of violence chased across his spirit now and then, he began, in a certain angry and dogged way, to admire Esther all the more for rejecting him. He had been chased so often and so long that he had grown weary of feminine blandishments. He had proved their utter hollowness and insincerity a hundred times.

Here, he begun to tell himself, was the first girl he had seen whom he had really cared to follow, and she would have none of him. If Esther had afforded him even the slightest encouragement she

would never have seemed one-thousandth part as desirable as she did now.

Whilst he sat there, or, at intervals, marched angrily up and down the room, a vague suspicion of the truth more than once occurred to him.

"If I let the little baggage see my hand," he said to himself, "she'll be getting some nonsense into her head about marriage. She mayn't like me, and I daresay she doesn't, but she'd like to be Duchess of Belisle one of these days."

Then, at the mere fact that such a thought should have crossed his mind, he took a momentary fright at himself, for it showed him, at least in part, the extent of his own infatuation. Then, in a sort of clumsy self-defence, he began to ask what there was to hinder him from doing as he pleased. He was ashamed enough of his

own conduct on the occasion of his last encounter with his father, but he was not on that account much less disposed to spite the duke. He would have to marry one of these days, and leave a legitimate successor behind him. He was a good deal of a blackguard, but he had a sense of family pride, and was in no mind to allow the house he would one day represent to die out for want of an heir. He had put off the duty of marriage for a good many years now, and the main feature in his hesitation had been nothing more nor less than his repugnance to ally himself with a lady. Nobody, he knew very well, however submissive, would endure his way of life without remonstrance, or tolerate the society of his intimates. Then there would be a father, or a brother, or a guardian, or some im-

pediment to freedom of that sort, some strait-laced person or another who would do his best to make things uncomfortable, and to put restrictions on his liberty. He could marry whom he pleased, and would marry whom he pleased; but he swore bitterly that he wouldn't be fished for, and if that were Miss Delacour's game, he had beaten a hundred before her, and had no fear of her.

He kept in this mind for an hour or two, and at last, a little after midnight, one of the hotel servants came to say that Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop had called, and wished particularly to see his lordship. The marquis gave orders for the manager's admission, and sat down to await him.

Wilstrop came in with a face of unusual solemnity, and the marquis bade him gruffly to be seated.

"I've got a dreadfully awkward bit of business to transact, dear boy," Mr. Wilstrop began, "and I hope you won't be riled at what I am going to ask you."

"Oh!" said the marquis, "and what are you going to ask me?"

"Well, you know," said Wilstrop, distorting his countenance painfully and feeling it carefully all over as if to ascertain that he was clean shaven, "it's a beastly awkward thing to say, but there's a chance that your lordship may cost me a very great deal of money, and may render ineffective the expenditure of a great deal of time and trouble."

"Oh!" said the marquis, "how's that?"

"It's in this way, dear boy," said Mr. Wilstrop, who hovered curiously between familiarity and a formal respect. "Miss Delacour's on the point of

signing a contract with me for a three years' engagement. It should have been signed to-night, and would have been if it hadn't been for something that happened at the theatre." He rose from his seat, and drawing a small parcel from his breast pocket unfolded it on the table, and displayed to Limesborough the maimed and battered jewels he had left in the box that evening. "These were brought back to Miss Delacour," said the manager, speaking with a genuine hesitation, "and she handed them over to me. She asked me to bring them to your lordship, and to deliver a message."

"Spit it out," said his lordship, with a lowering eye upon him.

"Nobody values more highly than myself," said Mr. Wilstrop, "the advantages of your lordship's friendship and patronage. But, if I lose them,

I lose them in a good cause. Miss Delacour's message was simply this. She has ambition, and I have taught her to believe—what I know to be the truth—that a very high place is waiting for her in the profession she has adopted—probably the very highest. In a few years she may be the undisputed queen of the stage. Her beauty and her talents warrant me in that belief. But she has made up her mind, my lord, that she will resign her ambition and retire into private life if she cannot be free from your lordship's importunities."

In answer to this his lordship entrusted Mr. Wilstrop with a message for Miss Delacour, which shall not be here transcribed. The gist of it was that he saw through her little game and through Wilstrop, and that if they thought he was such an ass as that they were mightily mistaken. Having

delivered himself thus in his own vernacular, he invited Mr. Wilstrop's attention to the door, and asked him whether he would prefer to be kicked through it or to leave it in the more usual fashion. Mr. Wilstrop availed himself of the choice offered with a trembling alacrity, and the marquis thundered anathemas at him as he walked downstairs.

"I've gone too far," said the manager, as he went homewards. "I have pushed him too hard, and I have made an ass of myself."

CHAPTER XXIII.

MATTERS stood thus at the moment at which Esther made her second appearance at the Sheridan Theatre in the part of the Little Widow. Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop had not boasted himself in vain, and at the rehearsal which Glynne had ordered he and his ancient, Francis, exchanged glances of wonderment and approval. Miss Delacour was simply improved beyond knowledge. In her eight months' experience in the country she had found her stage feet. She had learned the essential secret of repose, without which no talent, without which indeed no genius, can hope to find

its true value on the stage. The great art of doing nothing when nothing can be done, with advantage, is the one rare thing in all forms of art. The masterly inactivity, praised in politics by a master, is valuable in business, in love, in painting, and in letters ; but it is nowhere so essential as it is upon the stage. The amateur is known everywhere by a fussy hankering after detail. The master is everywhere notable as much for what he omits as for what he does. Miss Delacour was on the way to be a great actress, and the men of experience who watched her recognised that fact at once in spite of prejudice. The ladies were bitterly critical, but they, poor things, had their excuses. The men, who had nothing to fear from their association with an unusually pretty and clever girl, warmed from

doubt to interest, and from interest to enthusiasm.

"I think she'll do," said Glynne to Wilstrop, with a purposed assumption of indifference.

"Yes," Wilstrop answered, with equal dryness. "I think she'll do. You can try her for a month at the contract terms, and then we'll talk about a further arrangement."

There was no special interest excited by Esther's first appearance. A paragraph or two was dropped loosely here and there in journals of no special significance or power; but her triumph with the house was now unmistakable. Wilstrop had a word with Glynne before the piece was half over.

"I should like to see the receipts for the last month," he said, "and the receipts for the next four weeks; that will give us a basis to work on."

Glynne made no objection to this proposal, and Wilstrop had nightly access to the returns. The piece was playing, and had been playing for months past, to a nightly average of something like two hundred pounds. This yielded a magnificent profit to everybody concerned; but it was open to a conceivable increase of three hundred pounds a week. Beyond that the holding capacity of the theatre could not go. But at the end of Esther's first week the sum paid at the doors and at the libraries had risen half-way from the average to the maximum. By the end of the second week the maximum was reached, and from that time business flowed unchangingly. The deadhead was rigorously excluded, and from the first row in the stalls to the hindmost bench of the gallery every seat in the theatre meant money. The amateur

of less than a year ago had London at her feet, and Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop's contract became a source of very considerable profit to him. He was not ungenerous to his *protégée*, for she was a young lady who demanded, above all things, to be kept in good temper; and he was not the man to kill the goose that laid his golden eggs.

All this time poor Jing lay between life and death, and little cared for except by her own immediate circle. Now and again a message came from the theatre, and once or twice members of the company called to make inquiries. A daily bulletin was exhibited on the wall opposite the stage door keeper's box; but since day after day it offered the same monotonous intelligence of "No change in Miss Broom's condition," it grew gradually to be disregarded. Mark called daily at

the house, and grew day by day more anxious. He and the old stock actor saw a good deal of each other at that time, and walked silently about the streets together, or sat silently at the club over their whisky and water and the daily journals. Mrs. Broom, as a matter of course, made no objection to Mark's visits at this time; but the house had a darkness and a hush about it, and something very like a sentiment of despair.

Nobody can say how things might have gone if Jing's innocent secret had never been entrusted to Mark's keeping. But he knew the truth now, and all his thoughts were with her day by day. The image of Esther, little by little, became obliterated in his mind, and to his own surprise the young fellow found that he could bear to think of her without pain or anger. The thought

of Jing inspired him with an exquisite pity, and he remembered that she had been, from the first hour of his acquaintance with her until so short a time ago, the unobtrusive good fairy of the house—the quiet, gentle, loyal, all-enduring little creature. And he knew now that she loved him.

> Maggie's was a piteous case,
> Duncan was a lad o' grace.

His heart grew more and more tender revolving these things; and long before the girl grew well again Mark had made up his mind, and he suffered for her such a poignant anxiety as no mere friend or well-wisher ever endured for any one.

He was leaving the house one night, and had already laid his hand upon the catch which secured the door, when a tremulous knock sounded from

without, and Mark, throwing the door wide open, found himself face to face with the Herr von Nadli.

"Id is you, Misder Shdanley?" said the old musician in a whisper. "I haf galled to ask the news. Dell me vot id is. I vill not drouble them to come in."

"It's about as bad as it can be," Mark answered. "The doctor says that to-night will decide everything. What brings you to London?"

He closed the door noiselessly behind him, and came out noiselessly upon the street.

"I am in London," the old gentleman responded, "for a veek or two. Chuniper is with me. Ve take a turn at the Megatherium efery night. You must come and see us. Chuniper is going to pe a creat man. He has cot all manner of dalents."

Mark, surveying his companion by the faint light of the gas lamps, thought that he was attired in unusually prosperous fashion. His own heart was sore enough, but he did not choose to wear it on his sleeve for Von Nadli's inspection. He feigned a gaiety he was far from feeling, and, arresting the old gentleman immediately beneath a lamp, turned him round with an air of burlesque admiration.

"You're quite a swell, Von Nadli. What has happened to you?"

"Id is all Chuniper," said the Herr von. "He has wridden a blay in fon agt for the muzig halls —vod you gall a sgedge. I blay the glarionet, and dalk a liddle. Chuniper dalks all the rest of the dime, and tances. He has infendit a bair of boots, lonker than he is, and the autience oggcepts

him mit rage. Ve are making twenty pounds a veek between us."

Mark congratulated the old man heartily, and walked with him towards the scene of his nightly engagement.

"Gome in and zee us," Herr von Nadli besought him. "They vill be brout to give Mr. Shdanley a box if I only mention his name."

Mark, in mere listlessness of heart, accepted this offer, and sat through all the buffooneries of the evening until Juniper's sketch arrived in its turn. The diminutive man made a special salute to the box in which his old friend and patron sat. Mark watched the performance and shrank out of sight, ashamed of his own saturnine face. Juniper's notions of humour and pathos were primitive; but they suited the audience for whose benefit they

were exploited, and when both humour and pathos were swept off the field in favour of an amazing eccentric clog dance in the boots of which Herr von Nadli had spoken, the house went wild with joy. Mark could do no less than walk round to congratulate the dwarf upon his achievement.

"It's your example as has done it, Mr. Stanley," said Juniper. "If it hadn't ha' been for livin' in the same 'ouse with you so long I should never ha' thought o' turning dramatic author. When you come to think of it it's a wonder as anybody does anything else. It's so bloomin' easy when you've once got the feel of it, ain't it? I don't feel equal to a five-act drama yet, but I've got an idea for one, and if I ain't on at the Surrey in a twelvemonth it won't be my fault."

Mark lingered until his old friends had taken the stage paint from their faces, and had exchanged the grotesque habiliments of the sketch for the everyday attire of the street. Then, at Juniper's urgent invitation, he went round to the bar, where the little man was the cynosure of all eyes, and there drank to his health and prosperity. Then, more depressed than ever, because of the pretences of the last hour, he left them, and wandered back to Keppel Street, where, by pure hazard, he found the doctor in the act of entering the house.

"I shall wait," he said, "until you come down again. Let me know the worst or the best as soon as you can."

The doctor promised and went quietly upstairs. Old Broom joined Mark in the parlour, and they sat expectant for five minutes, listening, as men do

in a house of sickness, to every sound of movement in the upper chamber. The time seemed vastly longer than it really was, but at length the doctor joined them. He was grave and tranquil, and he laid a hand upon the elder man's shoulder with a firm and comforting grip. Broom looked up at him, not trusting himself to speak.

"I don't want to be too hopeful," said the doctor, "but I think we have passed the crisis."

There are a dozen men of eminence in the ranks of the medical profession in London who rejoice in rendering service to artists of all sorts, and who never dream of charging for their labours a tenth part of the fee they have a right to exact from the common run of patients. The Broom family had been very prosperous till Jing fell ill; but in spite of that, and in spite of all their economies, they

could not have dared to call in a man so able and so costly as the doctor who attended Jing. He had come of his own accord at Glynne's instance, and the father and mother pinned their faith upon his name and reputation as if he had been a sort of minor deity. The old man began to cry at the news, and Mark was hard put to it not to follow his example.

Jing's illness had lasted only six weeks so far, but he had learned much in that time, and at that moment the lesson was completely mastered; for he knew beyond doubt that if Jing had died she would have left a far more dreadful blank in his life than Esther could ever have made there. He was not the first young man in the world to take a passing fancy for a lifelong passion, and Esther's open ingratitude and Jing's danger had oper-

ated in an inevitable direction, if with unusual swiftness.

The doctor was more assured next day, and next day still more assured. In less than a week Jing was out of danger, and in a fortnight she was downstairs again, looking very pale and fragile, but happy in the happiness of those about her. There was a quiet little *fête* held to celebrate her first appearance below stairs, and Mark was present at it, but everybody was careful not to excite the patient.

Jing retired early, and Mrs. Broom took an opportunity of drawing Mark aside.

"You'll remember what I told you, dear," she said, with tears in her kind eyes. The professional folk who simulate emotions for the pleasure of the rest of the world are apt to show their emotions

amongst each other more readily than common people. Mark knew the old lady too well to doubt the sincerity of her feelings.

"I remember," he said.

"You don't feel hurt about it, Mark?"

"No," said Mark. "I don't feel hurt about it, but I don't mean to take any notice of it. I mean to act as if I had never heard it. When Jing is strong enough to listen to me I shall have something to say to her."

"Mark!" cried the old woman, clasping her hands before her, "be sure of what you're doing."

"I wish," Mark answered, "that I was as sure of Jing as I am of myself. I shan't be long in finding out, in any case."

"But, Mark," said Mrs. Broom, "your mind

was set another way a little while ago. I knew it, and Jing knew it. It was there, plain for everybody to see."

"Perhaps it was," Mark answered; "but I don't want you or Jing to think me quite as shallow-hearted and as fickle as I look."

It was not loyal or like a gentleman to disparage the character of the girl with whom he had thought himself in love a brief half-year ago, and so he was compelled to hold his tongue. But Esther had so declared herself that there had been no doubting her. She stood proclaimed wholly heartless and selfish, a monument of greed and ingratitude. There was not a word to be said on that side; but he contented himself by saying that he had been a fool, and that he knew now where his own happiness lay.

"You'll have to deal with Jing," said Jing's mother; "and she's not the girl who's going to let anybody marry her out of pity."

"If Jing will bless and honour me by being my wife," Mark answered, "I shall be as happy as any man has a right to be. I don't want to marry her out of pity. I want to marry her because I know that I can't be happy without her."

Had Mark been less in earnest the problem which his relations with Jing presented might have been difficult of solution. But when she had been freed from her bedroom for some twelve days, and when the roses were coming back to her clear cheek, Mark found her alone one afternoon. She met him as she had always done, with a welcome which looked simply friendly. She had never shown any embarrassment in his presence; there had never

been any change in her colour at his coming or going, or any of the tell-tale little palpitations by which some girls innocently betray themselves in the like circumstances. She was just frankly glad to see him ; and her manner was wholly cordial, simple, and sincere, as her heart was. She accepted Mark's proffered hand, and her candid smile changed to a look of faint surprise to find that he retained hers in his grasp. She met his fixed gaze inquiringly ; and his aspect, which was sterner and more resolute than he knew, surprised her somewhat.

"Jing," he said, "I have something to say to you."

"Yes," she answered doubtfully. There was assuredly nothing for which he had a right to rebuke her ; but he looked, she thought, as if he were about to scold.

"Whilst you have been lying ill," said Mark, "I have had time to think. When we all thought we were going to lose you I can't tell you how bitter and terrible it seemed to me. I found that I had been mistaken in my thoughts about you for a long time past. I can't live without you, Jing; or at any rate I can't live without you and be happy. I want to ask you to be my wife."

Jing went very pale at this. Mark still held her hand—he had it in both his own this time, and his ardent and glowing look bore her eyes down for a moment, but only for a moment. She looked up again bravely and answered him.

"No, Mark. You don't mean what you say."

"I mean it with my whole heart and soul, Jing," he returned. "I have always loved you. You have a right to hear everything from me, and I

don't know whether you can believe or understand. I loved you without knowing it. It is only since you fell ill that my heart has proved itself to me. I can't be happy without you, and if you'll take me I'll do my loyal best to make you happy."

"I know you always liked me, Mark," she answered. "I was always sure of that, and always very glad of it, but you don't love me in such a way as you fancy now."

"You think I cared for somebody else," said Mark. "You think I cared"—he boggled over the phrase, and tried back on it—"you think I cared for Esther. I thought so too, and now I know that I was wrong. It was a foolish, blind infatuation; but it is over, done with for good and all. I never loved, and never shall love, any other woman but yourself, dear Jing."

She made a movement to release herself, and at this the longing of his heart overmastered him, and he drew her to his arms.

"You care for me?" he said. "You care enough not to let me go unhappy all my life? Don't you, dear? Don't you?"

And Jing, who, as her mother had said of her, was one of the last girls in the world to take pity for love, said, "Yes".

CHAPTER XXIV.

His grace of Belisle, being at this time in Paris, was astonished one day to find a familiar face looking at him from the front page of an illustrated weekly journal, and to read beneath it the words, "Miss Delacour as the Little Widow". He turned to the inner sheets of the journal, and after a brief search discovered an article devoted to a history of the lady, and a singularly warm and appreciative criticism of her talents and her personal charms. It had been the old gentleman's habit all his life-time to forget the ladies who had charmed him, and to quit their society without explanation or

apology. He generally left some such trifle as a furnished house behind him, a fairly stocked wine cellar, a stable, and a handful or so of jewellery. His method might have been thought expensive by a poorer man, and, as a matter of fact, it cost him a few thousands a year. His grace was so wealthy that this made but little difference to him, and indeed he would have been put to the exercise of considerable ingenuity to have expended a fair half of his vast income. His personal habits were quiet and inexpensive enough; and most of his great places in the country had been left unvisited for years, their splendid furniture swathed in brown holland, and the few servants who guarded these scenes of lonely grandeur being left to do nothing on board wages.

He supposed, naturally enough, that Miss Dela-

cour, having returned to London, had gone back to the little house in Limesborough Gardens. Her unexpected success in the very part in which he had seen her so egregiously fail tickled his curiosity, and the weather being established and the season in full swing, he took train and boat for London, and within an hour or two after his arrival there ordered out his private hansom and drove off to pay Esther a visit. The albino page boy informed him that Miss Delacour had not returned. He was a little surprised at this; but on the following evening, having ordered a box to be reserved for him at the Sheridan, he went down to the theatre, and justified by personal observation the praise bestowed upon Miss Delacour by the public press. She was playing at perfect ease by this time, and the warm breath of popular applause

had long since thawed away from her the last faint chill of *gaucherie*. She trod the boards as if she had spent her life upon them, and the play went with an unflagging spirit from the first moment of her appearance on the scene. The duke took advantage of the first fall of the curtain, and presented himself behind the scenes. He had a word or two of congratulation for Glynne, and then sent in his name to Miss Delacour, who received him in the presence of her guardian dragon, Mrs. Jordan.

"Your friend Wilstrop has done wonders for you, my dear," he said, with the manner of one who had parted from her the day before yesterday. "I learned of your success in Paris, and came over on purpose to see you. Very satisfactory, indeed. I am delighted. Quite delighted."

"I am glad of your grace's approval," said Esther, with a demure little curtsy.

"I called at Limesborough Gardens yesterday," said the duke. "Why haven't you gone back again?"

"I think," Esther answered, "that your grace should hardly ask me that. It was not kind to place me in so false a position."

"My dear child," cried his grace, with a grave countenance, but a twinkle in his aged eye, "I trust I was guilty of no indiscretion."

"Your grace lost me the friendship and respect of the best and oldest friend I had in the world," she answered. "I was too young and inexperienced to know what construction might be placed upon my being there."

"My child! my child!" cried the old nobleman,

"this is surely a reflection on our excellent Jordan here. Our good Jordan's presence in the house was a guarantee of the moral atmosphere. It is perfectly true," he added, with a *bonhomie* so complete as quite to rob his speech of any seeming of spite or anger, "it is perfectly true, my dear child, that there are many young gentlemen in London whose society would be more agreeable to a young lady than my own, and it is perfectly true that there are one or two old gentlemen who are as foolish as I am. You are quite *rangée* now, my dear, and I trust there is no reason why we should not be always the best of friends."

"I am sure," cried Esther, "that your grace has always been most kind and generous to me. Pray don't think that I am ungrateful."

"Not for the world, my dear Miss Delacour," cried the duke, with a smiling flourish. "I will give no such fancy entertainment for a moment."

"The world is very censorious, your grace," said Esther. She had been reading a great deal lately, and was trying her best to assume the manner of a lady. She saw too few of the species intimately to copy the style with exactness, and his grace found the assumption of the character a little droll. "A girl in my position," pursued Esther, "an actress, finds herself open to misconstruction every day. She can hardly be too careful."

"My dear child," returned his grace, "your sentiments do honour to your heart. Be good, my child, and let who will be otherwise. I can assure

you, out of long experience of life, that the path of rectitude is the only one which leads to a permanent prosperity. Follow it, I beg. Now, or in twenty years' time, you will find the pursuit of virtue a valuable adjunct to your other charms."

The wicked old gentleman's manner was so delightfully smiling and friendly that the significance of his speech went for little; and Esther was unfeignedly pleased when he shook hands with her, and told her that he should always watch her career with a friendly interest. He was turning to go, leaning a little more heavily than of old on his crutch-handled ebony stick, when the door opened by a foot or so, and a voice from without asked:—

"Can I come in?"

His grace started at the voice, which sounded familiar and playful, and turning, cast one keen glance at Esther, who blushed and looked confused. Mrs. Jordan made a movement to the door ; but the duke's glance, turned on her, transfixed her midway. He walked erect from the room, and looking the Marquis of Limesborough full in the face with a countenance as expressionless as if he had never before beheld him, passed him without a word. His son laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"I beg your pardon," he said, in a surly, hang-dog fashion. "I want a word with you, sir." The duke stood stock still under the restraining hand, but neither spoke a word nor turned his head. "The last time we met, sir," said Limesborough, "I acted like a blackguard."

"You have always acted like a blackguard," said his father.

"I'm beastly sorry," said Limesborough clumsily. "I beg your pardon, sir, and I hope you won't think any more about it."

"I have long since ceased to think about it," the duke answered. "I have done my best to reconcile myself to the fact of your existence."

"Well, sir, I'm sorry," said the younger man, "and you've got a right to be down on me. The mischief is," he added, "that we ain't built like one another."

"That is the mischief," his father answered, and so walked away.

The marquis stood looking after him, half angry, half ashamed, and all sulky in aspect. It was not altogether his fault if he was unable to do things

gracefully, and at that minute he was at least doing his honest best, and found the doing of it bitter hard. To the proud clumsy sort it is as hard to apologise as it is to accept an apology.

Lord Limesborough swore a little under his breath, and then rapped at the door of Esther's dressing-room. He was bidden to enter, and obeyed the summons.

"I won't have you look like that, you naughty boy," said Esther. "You have been quarrelling with your father again. I wish you were more like him."

"Well, I'm d——d if *I* do," returned the marquis.

"John!" she cried, "if you use that sort of language in my presence I will not speak to you."

"Well, I won't," said Limesborough. "That's

a bargain. If ever I swear when you are by, you pitch into me."

"I won't have you swearing at all," Esther retorted. "It's a disgusting habit, and quite useless. I don't know how you ever grew to be so coarse and vulgar."

"Here," said his lordship, turning on the guardian dragon, "you get out. I want to speak to Miss Delacour privately."

"Stay where you are, Jordan," said Miss Delacour. "You can say what you like, John."

"I wish I could," Limesborough answered in a hoarse whisper, bending over her. "I couldn't if I'd got a year to say it in. I should like to say a lot of things I never shall say. I'm one of the stupid lot. I don't know how to speechify. If I'd have thought about it I might have stuck

to my books a little bit more. But don't you pitch into me always. I can be led, but I won't be driven."

"You shall be led," said Esther, "when you are good, and driven when you are naughty." She smiled point blank in his eyes; and the infatuated marquis, regardless of the dragon's presence, seized her white hand and mauled it. It left faint traces of a compound of glycerine, zinc and lavender water on his lips, but he paid no heed to that.

"By gad, Esther!" he said, "you're the prettiest girl in England."

"You don't mean to tell me," Miss Delacour answered, "that you came here expressly to say that?"

"Well no," he said, "I didn't, but I couldn't

help it. I think I'm crazed about you. Upon my word I do. I believe in what folks say about a man being bewitched. Look here; I'm going to see old Wilstrop to-morrow, and buy that contract. I won't have my wife on the stage, and I ain't going to wait three years, nor anything like it. Nor three months, neither."

"You will wait as long as you have to wait, John," said Miss Delacour; but though the words were unpromising she gave him a smile and a blush which in combination were so ravishing that he kissed her hand again.

The call-boy's voice was heard outside, singing out in a shrill treble Miss Delacour's name; and the young lady, taking from Mrs. Jordan's hands a trifle of lace for her throat, a pair of gloves, and a hat which she dangled across her arm by its silk

ribbons, floated from the room with a backward smile at him.

"I hope your lordship will excuse the liberty," said Mrs. Jordan, "but I think your lordship ought to be a happy gentleman."

"You hold your jaw," retorted the marquis. "Never you mind what you think. Miss Delacour ain't the sort that *you've* been used to."

"Indeed she's not, my lord," returned the good lady, with ready acquiescence. "There's no sweeter, nor innocenter, nor better young lady in the world. But I can't help thinking, my lord, as it's a pity she's goin' to leave the profession. Why, in a year or two there wouldn't be anybody as could hold a candle to her."

"There isn't one of 'em can do that now," the

marquis answered. "She's worth the whole boiling lot of 'em."

"And that pretty, too!" cried Mrs. Jordan. "And that good and gentle with it! And that faithful to her humble friends!"

The guardian dragon had taken the measure of this young man's foot, and knew within limits how to handle him almost as well as Esther herself. When he was grumpy and disdainful with her, as, to do him justice, he was always natively inclined to be, she began to praise Esther; and that bait for his good-will never failed. He was over head and ears in love this time, and his passion altogether broke the bands of his clumsy reticence. He talked about Esther to anybody who would listen to him. Her grace, her beauty, her goodness were so constantly his theme that he was the

common laughter of Fleet Street and the Strand. It was currently said that he was degenerating into a milksop. His conversation had lost all its gruesome flavour, and if he cursed at all it was by accident. He drank in strict moderation, and though he did not altogether turn his back upon his ancient cronies, he did turn it with unmistakable meaning on their lady associates. In brief, he was making an effort to become respectable; and the *rôle* was so new, and he himself so little fitted for it by reason of long practice in a wholly different part, that for the present he seemed characterless. The cursing, roaring, drinking Lord Limesborough had been a model in his way; but the marquis, clean lipped and sober, was a nobody. He recognised this fact sadly, and even poignantly at times, but on the whole he felt that he had

come out of Egypt and its bondage, and the fleshpots looked worthless and uninviting in retrospect.

Mr. Bonnington Wilstrop was in really magnificent feather, and had excellent reason, as he believed, to pride himself upon his own astuteness. The marquis was determined to cancel Miss Delacour's contract, and Mr. Wilstrop was determined to be paid for doing it. Limesborough was not the man to be easily defrauded even in a case like this; but Wilstrop was able to prove, even at this early date in her career, Miss Delacour was worth a clear fifty pounds a week to him. He demonstrated to his lordship's lawyers the fact that if she were entirely in his own hands she would be worth three or four times that amount, and he held out resolutely for a three years' purchase. The marquis

thought himself bitten, but after all it was not for him to deny Miss Delacour's attractiveness, and even when he paid the money he felt a pride in the magnitude of the sum.

The society papers began to send forth rumours to the effect that a marriage had been arranged between an actress of exceptional talent and beauty and a nobleman of great wealth and ancient lineage; and everybody who pretended at all to a knowledge of society read between the lines and filled in the blanks with unfailing accuracy. The Duke of Belisle remained longer in ignorance than most people, but he was fated to be enlightened by the marquis himself. He was seated in the library of his town house when Limesborough walked in upon him. The duke, having assured himself of his visitor's identity by a glance, went on reading;

but Limesborough standing quite silent for a moment or two, the elder was the first to speak. He pushed on one side the reading-stand affixed to the arm of the chair he sat in, took off the spectacles by the aid of which he had been reading, and put up his black-rimmed eyeglass.

"To what am I indebted," he asked, "for the honour of this visit?"

"I'm going to do something," said Limesborough, "which I know jolly well you won't like."

"You need not have come here to tell me that," his father answered. "I have been assured of that at every minute of the day for years past."

"You can stick it into me as hard as you like, sir," said Limesborough, "and I shan't make be-

lieve to think that I don't deserve it. But I'm going to turn over a new leaf. I'm going to get married and settle down."

"'To quit sack and live cleanly,'" said the duke. "And who is the happy woman who has been honoured by your choice?"

"I'm going," his son answered, "to marry the best girl in England, and the prettiest and the cleverest."

"That sounds well," his father answered. "Who is she? Do I know her?"

"She ain't one of our set," the marquis answered, with considerable embarrassment, "and I should never have got on with one of our set. I'm going to make a clean sweep of it. I'm going to settle down, and I've made up my mind to settle down and to go into Parliament. I've cut liquor," he

added, with a growing awkwardness. "I've been as sober as a judge these two months."

"This is the return of the prodigal with a vengeance!" said his father. "But who is the lady who has worked this miracle?"

"Well, as I said before," the marquis answered, "she ain't one of our set."

"Are you going to settle in rural felicity with a milkmaid, or have you a corner public-house in contemplation? I don't profess to be too interested in your private affairs, but since you bring me this unexpected intelligence I have perhaps the right to be curious."

"I'm going to marry Miss Delacour," said the marquis, who would much rather have led a forlorn hope than have held this interview at all.

"You are going to marry——" The eyeglass

fell from the old nobleman's eye and clinked against his watch-chain. His face went suddenly grey, his mouth opened a little, and so stayed. He looked for an instant like a man who had received a mortal stab. "Who is Miss Delacour?" he made shift to ask.

"You know who she is," returned the marquis. "I met you coming out of her room at the Sheridan."

"In every act of your life," the duke returned, "you have been a standing insult to your name. You have been a rowdy, and a bully, and a drunkard; a foul-mouthed and fatuous ass. But I did not think that you were fool enough and brute enough to offer such a statement to me as you have just made. I desire you to understand distinctly, sir, that I will hold no further com-

munication with you. You may go on your own mad and disgraceful way, but I disown you. I separate myself from your folly and your crime."

"All right," said the marquis. His sanguine face was mottled, and under the mountain of insult his father heaped upon him he stood staring straight before him, with the strained and glassy look of a man in mortal pain. "I've done the square thing. I've told you what I'm going to do. And I know," he added, "that I'm going to marry the best girl in England."

"You—you—you monumental idiot!" burst out his father. "Your 'best girl in England' is as artful, as selfish, as calculating and cold-hearted a little vixen as you will find the wide world over."

"She's got to care about me," said the marquis.

"To care about you!" cried the duke half rising to his feet, and sinking back again in blank despair. "Go, for Heaven's sake, and let me have seen the last of you. I pray that you may live long enough to know what a fool you are and have been."

"All right," said the marquis again. "I didn't expect you to take it very easy, and you ain't any worse than I thought you'd be."

"Are you so blind," the duke demanded, with a last desperate effort, "are you so blind as not to see that that worthless little wretch would pretend to love you if you were an ape, seeing what you have to offer her?"

"Look here, sir," his son answered. "You've said what you liked to me, and I've took it quietly. But no man shall say things like that

about Miss Delacour. I wouldn't take it from anybody else, and I won't take it from you."

"Go away!" his father groaned. "Go away!"

Limesborough stood for a few irresolute seconds, and then walked to the door. He turned there, and saw that the old man had drooped forward and had hidden his grey face in both hands. Something touched him, the like of which he had never felt before—a sense of filial ruth and pity. He had not been a good son, perhaps he had not had altogether a good father. He went away in silence, for it was plain even to his poor intelligence that further words were useless. The servants watched him as he walked down the vestibule of the great house, across the courtyard, and into the street. People on the pavement looked at him as he got into his carriage, with

knitted brow and writhing face. He had some ado to calm himself; but by the time he had arrived at Miss Delacour's lodgings, whither he had instructed his coachman to drive, he was well under his own control again.

"I've seen the guv'nor," he said, "and he's cut up beastly rough, as I expected. I don't care about that, for we've never been a lot to one another since I can remember. We'll have the wedding very quiet, Esther. I'm off now for the licence. Give me a kiss, my dear. I'm going to be the happiest man in England."

"And I," said Esther, "am going to be the happiest girl in the world."

He hugged her passionately at this, the sweetest word she had ever granted him, and ran away, fairly afraid of betraying himself. He drove off

with more repentances than he could well hold, more hope and good resolve.

"That little woman," he said, with a heart swollen with love and pride and thanksgiving, "will make a man of me."

"And I," said Esther, standing before a dual glass in her daintily-furnished bedroom, "and I shall be Duchess of Belisle."

THE END.